

Parental Choice of a Charter School:  
Parental Decision-Making in Kansas City, Missouri

By

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### **Abstract**

The purpose of this research was to create a qualitative and descriptive study by investigating the perceptions and reasoning that led parents to send their children to a public charter school in Kansas City, Missouri. This study seeks to understand the parental decision making regarding school choice in their community.

This research was designed to identify and investigate the influential factors, variables, and other program characteristics such as the instruction, curriculum, teacher quality that lead parents to make the decision to enroll their children. It also examined what parents value in schools and the way in which most parents obtain information about the school in order to make their decision. Data were collected from school staff and parents through open-ended interview.

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## **Chapter 1**

### **Introduction**

One of the foundations of our American educational system is the belief that every child should have access to a quality education. One component of this access is the fact that parents now have the choice to send their children to traditional public schools (TPS), private schools, home-schools, and charter schools, or even choose virtual education. Every parent envisions the perfect school to send their child, a school that fulfills all of their preferences (Jacobs, 2011).

One of the most important decisions a parent makes for his or her child is choosing where he or she will go to school. Many parents typically have chosen schools by default through selection of the assigned neighborhood school (Jacobs, 2011). However, the current education reform environment stresses policies that make simple selection of the neighborhood school one option among many. Reform advocates assert that various features of the institutional structure of traditional public education system hinder excellence and accountability in education (Chubb & Moe, 1990). Such features include school boards that are oriented toward maintaining the status quo, engaged in micromanagement of schools, or dysfunctional due to political dynamics; excessive turnover of Superintendents, particularly in urban areas; stringent teacher certification requirements; collective bargaining rules; and regulations regarding curriculum and other facets of school operations (Chubb & Moe, 1990).

Charter schools “have been promoted as a vehicle to restructure urban education” by creating smaller, less bureaucratized schools that better serve the needs of local communities and families (Fusarelli, 1999, p.216). More than half of the 2,000 charter schools in operation in 2000 were located in or near large urban areas (Manno, 2000). Many of the largest urban school districts in our country have experienced their share of turmoil over the years.

Kansas City, Missouri School District (KCPS) educates approximately 16, 000 students from various cultural and ethnic backgrounds from throughout the city. A free/reduced lunch rate of 89.1% suggests that the majority of the students attending the district's schools currently live in poverty. KCPS has been plagued for years with similar issues of other large urban school districts across the country. One of the major issues of KCPS has been a revolving door of Superintendents, low academic performance, alarming high school drop-out rate, and drastically decreasing student enrollment.

The district was provisionally accredited in 2002 due to low academic performance, after losing its accreditation in 2000. Provisional accreditation means that the school district is still accredited with consequences defined by state law. An unaccredited status requires that the unaccredited school district must pay tuition for students transferring to an accredited school district, and that receiving district must accept those students (DESE, 2015). After losing its accreditation in 2012, the school district was given two years to regain provisional accreditation. More recently in 2013 the state department of elementary and secondary education threatened to take over the district due to continued poor academic performance. As a result of rising state assessment scores during the spring of 2014, KCPS is once again provisionally accredited.

The opening of charter schools in Kansas City was intended to meet the needs of students who could not afford to attend private schools, and would otherwise have to attend the district run neighborhood schools. Similar to other states most charter schools are located in urban areas. The population of charter schools within the boundaries of the Kansas City Missouri School District has grown tremendously since 1998, when Missouri's charter school laws were passed. Charter school laws were one part of legislation designed to end decades of court-ordered desegregation in Kansas City and St. Louis. As of fall, 2013 there are 21 charter schools



designated as local education agencies in Kansas City, Missouri. The increasing number of charter schools serves to give parents an alternative to the provisionally accredited neighborhood schools within KCPS. Based on 2015, state assessment data from the Missouri Department of Elementary and Secondary Education (DESE) only 10 out of the 21 charter schools in Kansas City are performing better than the schools in KCPS on the annual state assessment. Charter schools in Kansas City are to give parents additional educational options, but several of them are not performing as well as the KCPS schools. The purpose of this research is to gain an understanding as to why parents choose charter schools for their children to attend. This study is specifically geared towards those parents who choose charter schools that have state assessment scores lower than a similar school in the KCPS.

The charter school policy innovation is one of several recent reforms aimed at altering the accountability arrangements in public education (Mintrom & Vergari, 1997). As originally conceived, the charter school concept embodies several values and objectives (Kolderie, 1992, 1994; Nathan, 1994, 1996). Only two are pertinent for this discussion. First, charter schools operate within a framework of deregulation and site-based management. In short, they enjoy broad decision-making freedom and operational autonomy at the building level (Vergari, 2001). Charter schools are considered independent local education agencies or local school districts. A second integral objective of the charter school concept is genuine accountability for school performance. Charter schools, which are publicly funded educational entities, engage in a bargain with the public. In return for regulatory relief and operational autonomy, charter schools agree to be held to high standards of accountability for their performance (Vergari, 1999). For example, unlike KCPS a charter school in Kansas City would not be provisionally accredited or even lose its accreditation based on low performance. Charter schools are either accredited or

they do not exist. Charter schools can be closed by the state department of education when the academic performance of the students does not improve. In the state of Missouri, charter schools have been closed for a number of reasons. Reasons such as, low performance, low enrollment, poor fiscal management, and failure to comply with charter school law have been the primary reasons charter schools were closed in Kansas City.

Choice of charter schools has been a growing phenomenon for parents across the country. Charter schools reached a milestone in 2009-2010 school year with 5, 042 schools serving over 1.5 million students in 39 states and Washington, DC (Center for Education Reform, 2010). From 1999-2000 to 2011-2012, the number of students enrolled in public charter schools increased from 0.3 million to 2.1 million students. During this period, the percentage of all public schools that were public charter schools, based on schools that reported enrollment, increased from 2 to 5 percent, comprising 5, 696 schools in 2011 – 12 (National Center for Education Statistics, 2013). Based on data from DESE, Kansas City charter school enrollment has increased from more than 6,600 students in 2003 to currently serving more than 10,000 students. As charter school numbers continue to grow at a steady pace, more parents are becoming interested in these independent school districts as alternatives for their children's education (DESE, 2017).

Supporters of charter schools claim that increasing school choice will create schools that are better suited to students' individual needs. Most notably, they claim that parents would reach their decisions on the basis of the academic quality of a school, thereby establishing competitive incentives for all schools to raise their academic performance (Buckley & Schneider, 2003; Hassel, 1999; Lubienski, 2003). The literature has not reached a consensus on this claim, and there is not definitive agreement on the various possible influences affecting parental choice in

charter school systems. The dilemma of finding the right school for their children remains a challenging task for many parents, especially those who do not have the financial resources to overcome the obstacles of sending their children to privately funded schools or moving closer to high-performing public schools (Chubb & Moe, 1990; Lankford & Wyckoff, 1992). Many of the findings on parental choice of schools have been linked to the school's overall academic achievement (Hoxby, 2001; Fiske & Ladd, 2000; Solomon, 2003). There have also been other reasons that promoted preference of charter schools, such as facilities, location, and extracurricular activities (Schneider & Buckley, 2002; Schneider, Teske, Roch, & Marschall, 2000).

The majority of the research on charter schools has focused on student achievement and the types of students that attend these schools (Betts & Tang, 2011; Gleason & Silverberg, 2010; Hoxby, 1998). Although, there has been limited research on parental choice, satisfaction, and expectation of charter schools, most of it has been done in larger metropolitan cities, i.e. Washington D.C. There has been very little research done on the decision making process of parents who choose charter schools. This study will seek to explore the factors that influence parental choice and decision making of charter schools in Kansas City, Missouri. The purpose of this study is to understand why parents in one metropolitan area choose charter schools as an alternative to KCPS. Based on state assessment data, the school district and the charter schools are performing about the same. There is not a huge difference in the test scores. So why do parents still choose charter schools in Kansas City?

Despite the rapid expansion of school choice, many doubt the ability of parents to make good choices. The Carnegie Foundation (1992) concluded that many parents base their school choice decision on factors that have nothing to do with the quality of education, including the

availability of daycare, convenience, social factors, and the range and quality of interscholastic sports. There is much concern about how parents make decisions concerning school choice. If parents, specifically low-income parents, consistently choose schools based on non-academic factors, then school choice could become disastrous. It could lead schools to concentrate more on social factors to attract parents, rather than academic factors. Also, parents often rely on their communities for information and guidance in selecting a school for their children's education (Bryk & Schneider, 2002; Moe, 2001; Schneider et al., 2000). A second purpose of this study is to understand how parents gather information about schools to help them make school choice decisions.

In order to examine the research questions, the researcher will utilize qualitative research methods to understand the experiences and decision making processes of parents who choose charter schools in Kansas City, Missouri. In-depth interviews will be utilized as the primary source of data collection. A purposive sample of parents will be selected from parents who currently have their children enrolled in charter schools. Parents who currently have children enrolled in a lower performing charter school in KCPS will help us to understand non-academic reasons for choice of a charter school as an educational option. The charter schools chosen will be based on DESE annual assessment data and school report cards. One criterion for charter schools chosen will be assessment data that shows lower academic gains than KCPS.

### **School Choice as an Educational Reform Model**

Taken at face value, school choice is a pretty simple idea and may take several forms. It may be limited to choice among public schools within a particular school district, as is the case with many open enrollment programs, or it may allow for choice of public schools across district boundaries as is the case in the state of Minnesota. Additionally, many public school systems

have magnet schools or charter schools that draw students from wide geographic areas (Goldhaber, 1999). Kansas City, Missouri is a very culturally diverse area with various types of religious, magnet, and charter schools. The charter schools in the area have various themes such as technology, foreign language, math, science, and the arts. The charter schools in Kansas City must sit within the boundaries of the Kansas City School District. Charter schools in other large cities, such as Washington DC are open to students throughout the area. Originally, when charter schools first opened in Kansas City, they were required to be sponsored by KCPS, but state law now allows for each charter school to be designated as a local education agency like any other district in the state.

Offering a quality education is the top priority of every school, and sending their children to good schools is every parent's dream. Over the last two decades, numerous school choice policies have been implemented in the United States. Most recently the reauthorization of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act, popularly known as the "No Child Left Behind" Act, (NCLB) has accelerated a three decade long trend towards school choice. Arguments in favor of greater school choice rest on two propositions: (a) that competition among schools for students will help reduce inefficiencies in the delivery of education, and, in doing so, improve educational outcomes, and (b) that choice would serve to give more control over educational decisions to parents who in turn would choose good schools for their children (Goldhaber, 1999). Supporters of school choice believe that because tax dollars follow students schools have to attract students in order to survive. In theory, parents will vote with their feet for good schools and bad schools would be forced to either improve or go out of business (Goldhaber, 1999). Those same schools must then respond to the needs of students in very creative ways in order for the parents to continue to choose them. Opponents of school choice fear that it will increase segregation by

race and social class (Orfield & Eaton, 1996). In his Fourth Bracey Report (1994) on the condition of education, he argues that interest in school choice is on the wane, and for good reason: the evidence says that choice does not live up to its claims. The argument is that a market-driven system of education will promote racial and religious segregation instead of performance. Research has fully determined that charter schools across the United States increasingly segregate their students along racial, economic, and linguistic profiles (Frankenberg, Siegel-Hawley, & Wang, 2010; Miron, Urschel, Mathis, & Tornquist, 2010). Based on data from the National Alliance for Public Charter Schools, public charter schools across the nation enroll, on average, a greater percentage of low income students (46 percent versus 41 percent), Black and Latino students (27 percent versus 15 percent and 26 percent versus 22 percent), and students who perform lower on standardized assessments before transferring to charter schools (National Alliance for Public Charter Schools, 2017). Based on this same data, it is clear that charter schools reflect the demographic patterns of TPS in the same area.

Who should decide where children go to school? Should parents make this decision? Will competition among schools force schools to improve? These questions are at the center of the school choice debate. The market place model for education has been among the prominent themes in education policy discussions over the last two decades. School choice is easily one of the most controversial education policy issues of our time. It involves the process of taking the control of education away from school boards and state legislatures and replacing it with the freedom of the market (Smith & Meier, 1995). Choice encourages innovation and promotes the direct involvement of families. Giving parent's choice as to where to send their children has rapidly gained popularity across the United States.

## **Purpose of the Study**

There has been very little research regarding the determinants for choosing public charter schools over TPS. There is very little empirical evidence regarding why parents select a charter school and factors influencing that decision. School choice advocates contend that giving parents choice creates healthy competition among schools, providing schools with an incentive to improve (Goldhaber, 1999). Based on the ideal of the free market, the school must meet the needs of the consumer to stay in business. Opponents of school choice argue that offering parents choice will segregate schools based on race, class, and socioeconomic status (Orfield & Eaton, 1996). Parents often state academic quality as the most important factor in choosing a school, but there is also research that suggests social factors contribute to the decision as well (Weiher & Tedin, 2002). Without knowing why parents choose charter schools, charter school authorizers, school management companies, university sponsors, and school administrators cannot adequately market educational opportunities parents and students want. This study seeks to understand why parents in Kansas City, Missouri choose charter schools, and to further understand how parents gather information about the schools to help them make this decision.

My personal interest in this topic is from an academic perspective as well as from the marketing perspective. Parents choosing schools for non-academic reasons could influence schools to become more interested in marketing schools based on these factors as opposed to academics. There are over twenty charter schools in Kansas City with the opportunity to educate more than 10,000 students that are enrolled in them (DESE, 2015). This would indicate that there is strong competition for the students within the boundaries of the KC public schools. Also, several of the charter schools in the area are performing below the state average on the Missouri Assessment Program (MAP), the state's annual standardized test mandated by NCLB

(DESE, 2015). By having this type of information charter school authorizers, management companies, university sponsors, and school administrators will have information that will assist them in attracting parents to their school. The purpose of this qualitative study is to ascertain how and why parents select charter schools as an alternative educational setting for elementary students in Kansas City, Missouri.

### **Significance of the Study**

The very survival of a charter schools depends on the degree to which parents' beliefs are reflected, and that the schools are working hard to provide the educational experience that parents demand for their children. Current education reform legislation regarding parental choice provides parents with school choice options. The opportunity to choose a charter school over a traditional public school places parents in the position of an educational consumer. Based on market ideas charter schools must respond to the needs and expectations of their consumers in order for them to survive (Chubb & Moe, 1990). If parents, as educational consumers, promote competition between schools then ultimately this should force schools to improve academically and socially. Martinez et. al, (1995) explain that the central focus behind the concept of school choice is that parents are not only demanding a higher quality education for their children, but they are motivated to go out and find it. Therefore, leaders in all educational settings for school-age children must understand why parents select specific educational options for their children. Examining parents' experiences as they actually engage in choosing schools can help us better understand parental decision making in choosing charter schools. Therefore it is imperative to explore the perceptions and experiences of parents who have chosen charter schools as the preferred choice of education for their child.

### **Limitations of the Study**



The limitations of this study should not significantly threaten the validity of the research. First, this is not a study judging the overall effectiveness of charter schools. There are many researchers currently studying various topics relating to student achievement, and parental satisfaction in charter schools. Rather, this study is aimed at uncovering the reasons families give and the processes families undertake, when making the decision to enroll their child in a charter school in Kansas City, Missouri.

Second, this is not a study examining national trends in family choice and charter schools. It is merely an examination of the decision-making processes and reasoning of those families who have chosen the selected charter school in Kansas City. The results are meant to inform the discourse rather than to be generalized to all decision-making concerning school choice of charter school and enrollment decisions.

Thirdly, the focus of this study is not based upon static data, but rather upon the perceptions and interpretations of parents in an interview setting. These responses are based solely on their personal experiences as the educational decision maker for their child, and are subject to their honesty and the ideas they feel comfortable sharing with the researcher. This type of methodology is dependent upon the relationship between the participants and researcher.

### **Research Questions**

The research questions that will guide the study are as follows:

1. How do parents gather information about schools?
2. What specific qualities, programs, or activities at the school were of most interest to parents?

3. How do parents weigh the school's test data versus their child's individual test data when making enrollment/re-enrollment decisions?

### **Researcher's Role**

I have served as a school counselor, administrator, and now I am the Director of Special Education Services in the charter school where this research is conducted for the past six years. I bring this bias to the study, as one would assume. It was important for me, as the researcher to gather data in an unbiased and professional manner, to make participants feel relaxed, and to report the findings that answered the research questions in spite of the stated bias.

In order to ensure validity and trustworthiness and limit my bias, I triangulated the data, transcribed the interviews exactly as recorded and kept the original tapes. Participants were given the opportunity to participate in member checking. As a researcher, I have worked to ensure that this study was derived strictly from the perspective of the parents.

This study was personally rewarding for me. As an administrator in an urban charter school, I am deeply concerned about the quality of education that these children receive. Kansas City Missouri school district has consistently underperformed academically and has experienced constant turnover in leadership over the past three decades. Many of the charter schools in Kansas City are performing lower academically than the KCPS schools, but parents are still choosing the schools that perform worst than the schools they do not want their children to attend. The question is why? This work is so important to me because I want to empower and educate parents in the school choice process. My desire is for families and children to have quality schools to choose from. I am by no means implying that test scores are the only measure in which quality is defined, but that's the standard that's been set by government. I want

“choice” for our parents because I want quality education for our children, specifically children in the urban areas of Kansas City. A quality education may not promise a better life, but a quality education could certainly position children for opportunities of advancement through college and career readiness. All of the parents want a better education for their children than what they received while attending the TPS in Kansas City. The parents obviously equate different with better. Charter schools were created in on the premise that they would offer a “better” education for children. It is the responsibility of charter school founders, university sponsors, administrators, and parents to demonstrate and solidify that better can mean quality. Quality should be exemplified in higher academic achievement and learning environments that are culturally conducive to learning and high performance. Students should be able to compete with higher performing charter and/or district schools across the city and nation.

The quarrel over school choice center on whether choice, in and of itself can boost academic proficiency, especially for low performing schools. Just adding “choice” as an educational reform has not proven to be the key to improving academic achievement in schools. The best answer to the unanswered query of why are our schools failing, is to demand quality education. Market theorists simply posit that adding competition will increase quality. This may or may not be the case if parents, especially in urban schools are not even choosing schools based on academic quality. The purpose of this research is to understand how and why parents continue to choose Benjamin Banneker Charter Academy, even though it is a low-performing charter school in Kansas City. Low-performance is based on state test scores.

## **Chapter 2**

### **Literature Review**

The purpose of this study is to understand the decision making processes of parents who choose charter schools in Kansas City, Missouri. The literature review will give an explanation of the school choice debate, available school choice options, history of charter schools, and parental satisfaction and expectation.

#### **School Choice**

School choice policy, especially as embedded in NCLB legislation, assumes that empowering parents with choice will improve education by holding schools accountable and reenergizing democratic participation in public education. School choice is easily one of the most controversial education policy issues of our time. It involves the process of taking the control of education away from school boards and state legislatures and replacing it with the freedom of the market (Smith & Meier, 1995). Choice encourages innovation and promotes the direct involvement of families. Proponents of school choice believe that situating schools in a market-based environment will force schools to compete for students by improving the quality of the educational product (Chubb & Moe, 1990). Over the last two decades, numerous school choice policies have been implemented in the United States. The school choice policies include the availability of charter schools, homeschooling, government funded voucher programs and even virtual schools. At its most superficial level, the school choice debate is about two issues: (a) how students should be assigned to schools and (b) which schools should receive public funding (Fowler, 2002).

Important issues are at stake in the school choice debate, including the availability of viable options of school choice for parents. This is particularly important for parents who reside in large, urban school districts. Introducing the idea of market forces into the social structure of

the American educational system is a profound act. According to Schneider et al., (1998), the current belief underlying most current reform proposals is that education cannot be improved unless new actors are brought into the decision process, changing the way in which educational policy decisions are made, shifting power toward parents. Encouraging competition and consumer orientation is predicated on the assumption that there is a clear understanding of the decision making processes of parents. Having an understanding of how parents choose schools is fundamental in an analysis of school choice policy. The issue of how parents in urban schools decide on a public charter school in Kansas City, Missouri is the purpose of this study.

School choice has been prominent in the literature over the last decade. Most of research regarding school choice, however, has fallen into four main categories, including (a) policy implications; (b) correlations between parental involvement and school choice; (c) the impact of school choice regarding student achievement, continuous school improvement, and equity; and (d) school choice determinants. Yang and Kayaardi (2004) conducted a study to examine on a national level the determinants of parents who select non-public schools for school-age children. The methods used provide a model for this research on public school choice determinants. The authors intent was to determine which factors, if any, most predict why parents select non-public schools for their children. Insight into the question about why parents choose non-public schools could help researchers understand specific factors that influence parental school choice (Yang & Kayaardi, 2004).

**School Choice Options in Missouri.** The state of Missouri has charter school law and enables school choice through virtual schooling. Open enrollment exists, both for intra-district and inter-district public school choice; offering choice to parents within and among school districts. Currently, the state does not have a private school choice program, meaning that there

are no options for parents to receive government funded vouchers in order to attend private schools.

Missouri's public school system serves more than 916, 000 students, pre-kindergarten through grade 12, in 520 school districts and 56 charter schools in 39 charter local education agencies. Missouri school districts range from fewer than 20 to nearly 26,000 students. All but a few districts are fully accredited by the State Board of Education (DESE, 2015).

Charter schools offer another public school choice for families moving to Kansas City or St. Louis. Charter school law states provisions as to where charter schools can be located in Missouri (MO Revised Statutes Chapter 160):

160.400. 1. A charter school is an independent public school.

2. Except as further provided in subsection 4 of this section, charter schools may be operated only:

- (1) In a metropolitan school district;
- (2) In an urban school district containing most or all of a city with a population greater than three hundred fifty thousand inhabitants;
- (3) In a school district that has been declared unaccredited.

Homeschooling is one of the options available for meeting the state's compulsory attendance law. Missouri does not accredit, regulate or monitor private, parochial or home schools. Under Missouri law, any family may choose to home school (DESE, 2015).

Missouri supports a K-12 virtual school (MoVIP) that may be suited to a family's needs. Nearly 200 different classes are offered for students in grades K-12. Advanced placement, foreign languages as well as advanced classes like trigonometry, calculus and physics are some

of the offerings. All classes are tuition-based. MOVIP courses are open to all students (public school, private school or home school) (DESE, 2015).

**School Choice Options.** Giving parents choice as to where to send their children has rapidly gained popularity across the United States. School choice, as an educational reform can be broadly defined as any policy that is designed to reduce the constraints that current school configurations place on schools and students (Lamdin & Mintrom, 1997). Parents who wish to enroll their children in educational institutions that best meet their expectations have several options available, such as TPS, magnet, private, virtual and homeschooling. The most recent and most controversial reforms are charter schools and vouchers (Henig, 2000). To understand the various options for school choice is important.

***Traditional Public Schools (TPS).*** School choice made by American parents has traditionally been an important force in determining the education their children receive. Parents' ability to choose among fiscally independent public school districts (through residential decisions) and to choose private schools (by paying tuition) is such an established feature of American education that this is almost taken for granted. Yet, through these choices, American parents exercise more control over their children's schooling than do many of their European counterparts (Hoxby, 1998).

Generally, the first option is the traditional public school or the neighborhood school. TPS are schools that are a part of the school district. These schools consist of all grades, from kindergarten to grade twelve and must provide educational services to all students who are enrolled. The traditional schools are operated under the oversight of a state educational agency and are maintained through the use of public funds or taxes. Each school district sets up its own rules and district boundaries. Traditionally, the American public education system resolved the

issue of school assignment by using a geographic allocation system to determine which students would attend which schools. Forty-nine of the fifty states are divided into school districts which include varying numbers of schools within their jurisdictions (Fowler, 2002). The children who reside within their perspective districts are expected to attend school within it. In districts with more than one school per level, the district administration office usually divides the district into attendance zones. Children are then required to attend the school to which they are zoned. Many parents have long exercised school choice through residential location decisions.

***Magnet Schools.*** Magnet schools were created in late 1960's as an attempt to increase diversity and encourage voluntary desegregation through school choice. In order to encourage white students to attend urban schools that would otherwise be heavily nonwhite, magnet schools offered specialized courses in the arts or sciences or other fields. Magnet schools are located within public school districts; however they offer students a special academic focus or specialization (Smrekar, & Goldring, 1999).

***Private Schools.*** Another way in which parents have traditionally been able to exercise choice in the United States is by enrolling their children in private schools. Most private schools are affiliated with a church; some are elite preparatory schools; some are military academies; and there are other types as well (Kraushaar, 1972). These schools determine their own goals, standards and methods, which may reflect the values of owners or patrons, or perhaps a collective such as a diocese. Private education funding options take several forms: vouchers, tuition contracting, tax credits, tax deductions, and savings incentives. Vouchers are publicly funded saving certificates with an attached dollar amount that may be applied towards tuition or fees at private schools. Currently, six states (Florida, Maine, Ohio, Vermont, Wisconsin, and Utah) and the District of Columbia have voucher and tuition programs. Private school tuition in



America is not subsidized by state funds. Parents pay tuition for their children to attend private school, and in some cases students earn scholarships to attend. Private schools provide services in exchange for payment, and unless heavily subsidized from the outside, they must please their consumers – students and parents – if they are to prosper (Chubb & Moe, 1988).

***Charter Schools.*** According Ravitch (2010), charter schools are created when an organization obtains a charter from a state-authorized agency. Each charter would have a specific set of goals and a specific term (3 to 5 years) and would be rigorously evaluated to see what it had accomplished before the charter was renewed. In some states, such as California, regular public schools may convert to charter status, thus seceding from their school district to become an independent district of one school. Charter schools may be managed by nonprofit groups or for-profit businesses. They may be managed by a national or by a local community group.

Mulholland and Bierlein (1995) define a charter school as “....an autonomous educational entity operating under a charter, or contract, which has been negotiated...” between the organizers and a sponsor (p.5). Charter schools continue to play a central role in educational reform across the United States. According to a report by the Center for Research on Education Outcomes, (CREDO), charter school students now comprise more than four percent of the total public school population in the United States, a proportion that continues to grow every year. There was an estimated 2.3 million students being served in over 6,000 charter schools during the 2012-2013 school year (CREDO, 2013).

Some charter schools focus on specific disciplines such as math, technology or the arts. Others use methods such as Core Knowledge or Montessori, and many charters focus on college preparation or starting a career. Charters also offer education non-traditional settings, such as

virtual schools, (Center for Education Reform, 2010). Although charter schools do have a great deal more freedom to use alternative educational methods than do public schools, there are important limitations placed upon their autonomy. They typically are subject to state graduation requirements, funding formulas, and state accounting systems (Goldhaber, 1999). Corwin (1995) finds that in states that grant charter schools greater autonomy, more money is spent on instruction, teachers feel more freedom to teach in innovative ways, and there is greater parental involvement.

Charter schools represent a hybrid between a system of public school and public-private choice. Like magnet schools, charters utilize public funds, but they are generally subject to less regulatory control (Goldhaber, 1999). Charter schools are highly diverse in terms of the types of programs they offer. For instance:

- There are charter schools that take a “back to basics approach,” charter school that focus on individual student learning plans, and charter schools that require significant parental involvement as a requisite for student attendance (Geske, et al., 1997).
- There are schools designed to serve the needs of specific types of students, from dropouts and at-risk students, to homeless children and wards of the state, to the deaf and hearing impaired, to students for whom English is a second language (Geske, et al., 1997).

## History of Charter Schools

**Origin and Intent of Charter Schools.** The charter school movement in the United States gained considerable force during the early 1990's. The idea of charter schools is for people who believe that public schools can have a significant positive impact on youngsters who are not achieving in the TPS. The charter school movement brings together four powerful concepts: freedom and choice for families, entrepreneurial opportunities for educators, explicit accountability for schools, and thoughtful, fair competition for public school districts (Nathan, 1996).

The original idea of charter schools was proposed in the 1970's by Ray Budde, an educator and the author of a book entitled, *Education by Charter: Key to a New Model of School District*. Budde (1989) wanted teams of teachers to apply for charters to run schools within the district. Budde believed that the charter concept would lead to a restructuring of school districts, flattening their organizational chart while enabling teachers to take charge of decisions about curriculum, management, and instruction. At that time, the response to the idea of chartering programs in schools and charter schools was zero. Even though there was considerable dissatisfaction with the public schools, no one felt that things were so bad that the system itself needed to be changed.

In 1988, Albert Shanker, president of the American Federation of Teachers proposed that local school boards and unions jointly develop a procedure that would enable teams of teachers and others to submit and implement proposals to set up their own autonomous public schools within their school buildings. Shanker made clear that these new schools would be experimental, tasked with solving important problems of pedagogy and curriculum (Shanker, 1988). The idea wasn't then, nor is it now just to create hundreds or even thousands of new schools. The goal is

to encourage widespread improvements in public education (Nathan, 1996). Ted Kolderie (1993) explained the intent of the charter school idea in his September, 1993 newsletter as follows:

The essential idea is worth re-stating: It is to offer change-oriented educators or others the opportunity to go either to the local school board or to some other public body for a contract under which they would set up an autonomous and therefore performance-based) public school which students could choose to attend without charge. The intent is not simply to produce a few new and hopefully better schools. It is to create dynamics that will cause the main-line system to change so as to improve education for all students.  
(p.1)

The charter school movement was birthed in 1991 in Minnesota. Minnesota was the first state to pass legislation that would allow for the operation of a new type of public school – in essence, *publically funded private schools*. The first charter school opened in St. Paul, Minnesota was a paradigm of what Shanker had hoped a charter school would be: It aimed to help youngsters who had not succeeded in a regular public school. Its students, ages fifteen through twenty-one, had dropped out of school. They were from home situations marked by poverty or substance abuse. The school began with 30 students and eventually grew to about 120 students. In addition to academic classes it offered job skills training, counseling and other individualized social services (Ravitch, 2010).

Public school choice already had a strong base in Minnesota. Minneapolis and St. Paul had offered alternatives and magnet schools since the 1970's. Many of the educators in the area had already concluded that giving families options would work to reduce the number of unsuccessful students (Nathan, 1996). Minnesota's charter school legislation was considered

landmark because, for the first time in our history, it gave parents another option for educating their children, adding public charter schools to the options of home-schooling, private, magnet, and neighborhood public schools.

In 1994, as part of President Clinton's education legislation, Congress established a program to award federal dollars to spur the development of new charter schools. By fall 2001, some 2,300 charter schools had opened their doors, enrolling nearly half a million students. By 2009, the Center for Education Reform reported that there were about 4,600 charter schools with 1.4 million students (Center for Education Reform, 2009). By the end of 2011, 41 states and the District of Columbia also had enacted legislation that allowed the use of public funds for the purpose of providing parents with options for meeting the educational needs of their children (Stetson, 2013).

Charter schools "have been promoted as a vehicle to restructure urban education" by creating smaller, less bureaucratized schools that better serve the needs of local communities and families" (Fusarelli, 1999, p. 216). More than half of the 2, 000 charter schools in operation in 2000 were located in or near large urban areas (Manno, 2000). As originally conceived, the charter school concept embodies several values and objectives (Kolderie, 1992, 1994; Nathan, 1994, 1996). One objective was to set up a framework of deregulation and site-based management. This would consist of broad decision-making freedom and operational autonomy at the building level. A second integral objective of the charter school concept is genuine accountability for school performance. Charter schools, which are publicly funded educational entities, engage in a bargain with the public: In return for regulatory relief and operational autonomy, charter schools agree to be held to high standards of accountability for their performance.

**Who Can Charter a School?** As originally conceived, charter schools are legally and fiscally autonomous educational entities operating within the public school system under charters, or contracts. The charters are negotiated between organizers and sponsors. The organizers may be teachers, parents, or others from the public or private sectors. The sponsors may be local school boards, state school boards, or other public authorities, such as universities. The organizers manage the schools, and the sponsors monitor compliance with the charter. The charters contain provisions regarding issues such as curriculum, performance measures, and management and financial plans.

Charter schools may be established in several ways. Charter schools can be started by anyone who could persuade the state or a state-approved agency to grant them a charter. Across the country, charters have been opened by social service agencies, teachers, parents, for-profit firms, philanthropists, charter-management organizations, community groups, and others (Ravitch, 2010). They may also become established from existing public schools that convert to a charter school, and even tuition funded private schools have become tax-supported public charters. Finally, a charter school might emerge as an entirely new entity (Vergari, 1999).

**Charter School Accountability.** Accountability in charter schools is consistent with accountability in conventional public schools. They are required to administer the same state standardized tests as conventional public schools to determine the proficiency levels of their students and to account for state and federal requirements. In addition to the state tests that 88 percent of schools administer, respondents also report using additional academic assessments, either other standardized tests or their own intermittent academic growth tests (Center for Education Reform, 2010). The percentage of charter schools closed each year for failure to perform to required accountability measures has remained constant, demonstrating the power of

performance-based accountability, the hallmark of the charter school idea. Unlike conventional schools, which remain open despite their inability to improve student achievement or maintain strong operations, charter schools close if they fail to perform according to their charter (Center for Education Reform, 2010). Schools may be closed because of financial or managerial problems, academic deficiencies or in some cases, consolidation or district interference.

Charters are held accountable to the same testing and performance standards as every other public school and if they do not meet their goals, they must face the consequences.

Charter schools exist along a continuum of accountability. That is, the extent to which charter schools are held accountable for high standards of performance in a range of areas (e.g., student achievement, finances, parental satisfaction, governance) varies among charter schools across the states, and many vary even within a single state (Vergari, 1999). Different accountability arrangements can be attributed to differences in state standardized testing requirements, the content of the charter document, or differences in the practices and philosophies of the charter school authorizer.

Charter schools are subjected to two accountability processes. First, they are held accountable by the dynamics of the education marketplace. Key actors here include the parents, students, and teachers who have chosen the school and who may exercise their right to exit if dissatisfied with the school. Finn, Manno, and Vanourek (2000) assert that charter school accountability “is propelled mostly by public marketplaces in which a school’s clients and stakeholders reward its successes, punish its failures, and send it signals about what needs to change” (p.127). Secondly, charter schools are also held accountable by charter school authorizers and state departments of education.

Across the states and the District of Columbia, legislatures have permitted four different types of public entities to serve as charter school authorizers: (a) school districts; (b) state board or departments of education; (c) other existing public entities, such as cities; counties and bureaus that serve multiple school districts; colleges and universities; and (d) in Arizona and the District of Columbia, new public boards were created for the specific purpose of serving as charter school authorizers (Vergari, 1999). Charter school authorizers fulfill various roles. First, they review applications for new charter schools and determine whether the proposed schools are likely to be sound educational entities. Second after a charter has been issued, the authorizer monitors the school's performance under its charter and applicable laws and regulations. The charter includes provisions pertaining to matters such as governance, curriculum, student achievement, fiscal management, personnel, transportation, and food services. Thirdly, the authorizer makes decisions about whether and how to intervene in low performing charter school and whether to renew or revoke charters. Successful implementation of an accountability system is a complex task that requires adequate capacity not only on the part of the entity being held accountable, but also on the part of the entity charged with oversight ( Elmore, Abelman, & Fuhrman, 1996).

**History of Charter Schools in Missouri.** Charter schools are characterized as public schools that function under a “contract”, generally defined as a charter, with a school district or state. The charter includes terms and conditions under which the school must operate, including provisions for fiscal management and student accountability. The charter may be revoked if the school violates these conditions. Charter schools are held accountable for measuring and reporting student performance. Charter schools' emphasis on accountability, flexibility and local control make them attractive educational alternatives for many families. The charter school



movement was developed as an innovative school model designed to help improve our nation's public school system and offer parents another public school option to better meet their child's specific needs. The charter school model was rooted in the belief that public schools should be held accountable for student learning.

The nation's first charter school law was passed in the state of Minnesota in 1991. In 1998 Missouri became the 34<sup>th</sup> state to pass charter school legislation. Missouri charter school legislation was passed during a period when Kansas City and St. Louis school districts, and the state of Missouri, were anticipating the end of long and expensive desegregation programs. In 1996 a desegregation agreement provided two million dollars to the Kansas City School District (KMSD), and a similar amount to the St. Louis Public School District. The intent of the funding was to improve student achievement and desegregate the student population. The issues of school desegregation, school funding and urban education issues became a high priority in the state legislature and led to the passage of charter school legislation in May 1998. The Missouri's charter school legislation is contained in Senate Bill 781, and addresses all of the aforementioned issues relating to education.

In 2005 state legislation passed allowing charter schools to become their own Local Education Agencies (LEAs) as an alternative to operating under the local school district's LEA. This would allow the state department of education to distribute state and local funding directly to the charter school. In 2014 there are reported to be 20 LEAs in Kansas City and 17 LEAs in St. Louis serving more than 20,000 students.

The initial charter school law in Missouri provided a geographic 'cap' indicating charter schools could only be established in metropolitan or an urban school district containing a city with a population greater than 350,000 people. This restricted charter schools within the

boundaries of KCPS or the City of St. Louis. In 2012, the geographic ‘cap’ was removed allowing charter schools to open and operate throughout the State of Missouri based on the status of each of the 520 school districts (MCPSA, 2014).

Today a charter school may open:

1. Under an approved Sponsor in any unaccredited school district;
2. Under an approved Sponsor in any district provisionally accredited by the State for more than three consecutive years;
3. In an accredited school district with Sponsorship held by the district’s board of education.

**Academic Performance of Charter Schools in Missouri.** In the State of Missouri the Annual Performance Report (APR) is the accountability report card for school districts based on a district’s performance utilizing metrics from the Missouri School Improvement Program (MSIP). MSIP5 outlines the expectations for student achievement. The MSIP accountability system was established in 1990 and has evolved over time. Standards are divided into three categories, Resource Standards, and Performance Standards. Resource and Process Standards are designed to promote continuous improvement and innovation within each district. The Performance Standards are designed to recognize the achievement and continuous growth of students. In addition to metrics agreed upon between the Sponsor and charter school’s governing board placed in their legally binding performance contract, charter schools are held to the MSIP5 Performance Standards.

Each year DESE prepares an APR for each charter school reporting the school’s performance. Performance Standards focus on student achievement on the state’s assessment, student achievement on the state’s End of Course exams, student growth, subgroup achievement, college and career readiness, graduation rate, and attendance. A charter school receives points in

each applicable area based on their grade level configuration. Charter schools do not receive a classification of accredited, provisionally accredited, unaccredited by DESE rather the APR is for informational purposes only.

In 2015 Missouri's charter schools demonstrated, collectively, tremendous growth in the area of academic performance. The combined APR average for Missouri's charter schools increased from 68.6 % to 73.34% in 2014. In Kansas City, 14 out of 18 LEAs scored over 70% on their APR. The following data points are based on the results of the 2015 Missouri Assessment scores and speak to the academic achievements of charter schools in Kansas City:

- 4 charter schools improved in their percentage of proficient and advanced in English Language Arts (ELA)
- 7 charter schools improved in their percentage of proficient and advanced in Math
- 15 charter schools exceeded the local school district average in ELA
- 15 charter schools exceeded the local school district average in Math
- 4 charter schools exceeded the Missouri state average in Math
- The charter public school average for ELA is 34.21% exceeding the local school district average
- The charter public school average for Math is 35.58% exceeding the local school district average

Statewide the public charter schools in Missouri achievement in math slightly decreased from 38.71% in 2013 to 34.64% in 2014. English Language Arts scores increased from 34.54% in 2013 to 35.20% in 2014.

### **Common Struggles in Choosing a School**

Providing a quality education is the top priority of every school, and sending their children to good schools is every parent's dream. The dilemma of finding the right school for their children remains a challenging task for many parents especially those who do not have financial resources to overcome the obstacles of sending their children to privately funded schools or moving closer to high-performing schools (Chubb & Moe, 1990; Lankford & Wycloff, 1992). It was found in a study by Howell (2006) that generally, about 45% of parents in underperforming schools, claim that "if cost were not an obstacle," they would rather send their child to a private school than to their current public school (p. 163). Lewis Solomon (2003) tested the fear of critics who questioned if parents had the time, qualification, and information to make informed decisions about the quality of their child's school. He compared how parents and experts of the Arizona Department of Education rated 239 charter schools. The results revealed that officials and parents gave nearly identical grades to the charter schools in question. Parents and state officials agreed on the best charter school, and the average grade point average of each school on the "overall grade" question showed an exact match for 11 of the 14 schools selected with the largest number of parents responding to the survey (Solomon, 2003).

Indeed, if there is a single, consistent finding in the empirical literature on school choice is that students from poorer families or with less educated parents is less likely than middle class families to apply to- or participate in – public choice programs (Martinez, Goodwin, & Kmr, 1996; Moore & Davenport, 1989; Wells & Crain, 1997). This would call in to question concerns about how these parents receive information about schools. The complexity of the task of evaluating schools is compounded by the fact that the level of existing information parents have about schools is often limited (Schneider et al, 2000). One way parents become informed about

schools is through School Report Cards. The School Report Cards provide parents with information needed for informed choices: test scores, characteristics of the schools' students, the schools' resources and learning environment, school finances, and teacher/staff information. The Report Cards also include comparable, averaged data for other public schools in the home district, in similar socioeconomic school districts and throughout the state.

**Parental Satisfaction and Expectations of Charter Schools.** In exploring the decision making processes of parents in charter schools there has been some research done to explore parental satisfaction. The foundational argument of school choice rests upon the notion that when parents choose their child's school, consumer satisfaction is expected to increase. Existing research, without exception, has found that parents are more satisfied with schools they have chosen (Buckley & Schneider, 2003). It has also found that levels of parental satisfaction appear to be uniformly high in charter schools (Schneider, et al., 2000). Perhaps, one explanation of this is that education is a complex, multifaceted "good," and choice allows parents to select schools that emphasize the kind of education they want for their children (Schneider et al., 2000).

If the charter school movement is to have traction, parents who are satisfied with their children's schools represent a potential pool of supporters for further expansion of charter schools and choice in general. In contrast, if charter school parents are not satisfied with their child's schools, then a foundation for the charter school movement is missing. The very existence of charter schools hinges on parental satisfaction as exhibited in them actually choosing charter schools. There is a growing body of research that shows charter school parents are likely to be more satisfied than parents with children in TPS. This, of course, is congruent with theories of choice and with claims of charter school proponents (Chubb & Moe, 1990; Goldring & Shapira, 1997; Hassel, 1999). When Buckley and Schneider (2003) compared

parental satisfaction of parents in charter schools to parents in TPS, they found that charter school parents are more satisfied with the emphasis on values found in the school, size of the child's school, and their child's class size.

Existing research studies provide insights on parental expectations and satisfaction of charter schools. Most research on parental choice analyzes survey responses of parents who choose between TPS and either private schools or alternative public schools. According to Schneider, Teske, and Marschall (2000), New York and New Jersey parents list teacher quality and high test scores as the most important factors in school choice. Using parental survey data, Hamilton and Guinn (2005), found that educational effectiveness is an important factor influencing schools choice. The evidence presented does indicate that parents are able to distinguish between schools of varying quality, and that they respond positively to school quality by sending their children to schools that enhance the educational outcomes of their children (Goldhaber, 1999). Over the last two decades, numerous school choice policies have been implemented in the United States. Arguments in favor of greater school choice rests on two propositions: (a) that competition among schools for students will help reduce inefficiencies in the delivery of education, and, in doing so, improve educational outcomes, and (b) that choice would serve to give more control over educational decisions to parents who in turn would choose good schools for their children (Goldhaber, 1999). Opponents of school choice fear that it will increase segregation by race and social class.

### **How Do Parents Choose Schools?**

In the United States, offering parents increased school choice, in the form of vouchers, charters, magnet schools, and other types of programs has taken center stage in national debates regarding education. Still, few existing studies have explicitly examined the selections families

make in a choice setting. It is, of course, widely acknowledged that parents may take into consideration a number of criteria when forming their preferences for schools, including school safety, student body composition, race, and academic quality (Vanderhoff, 2008; Goldhaber, 1999; Saporito & Lareau, 1999). In an article in the *Economics of Education Review* by Bast and Walberg (2003), research shows how economic principles predict parents would do a better job choosing schools for their children than do experts in government agencies. They used surveys to show most parents choose schools on the basis of their perceived academic quality and data showing student academic achievement gains are higher in schools of choice than in TPS.

When asked what factors contribute to their decisions about where to send their children to school, most parents rank educational quality at or near the top. When families that use vouchers are asked about the reasons for that decision academic quality is typically cited as the most important reason, though religion and cultural values often rank highly as well (Green, Peterson, & Du, 1998). Results from a survey of charter school choosers indicate that educational quality and small class size were among the top factors cited by parents of all racial and income groups (Kleitz et.al., 2000).

School choice advocates propose a universal pattern of school selection based upon the importance of school quality (Saporito & Lareau, 1999). In studying how parents choose schools, it is extremely important to consider that the school choice process can be socially charged instead of academically motivated. According to the Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching (1992), “When parents do select another school, academic concerns often are not central to the decision,” (p. 13). This research concluded that parents base their school choice decision on factors that have nothing to do with the quality of education, including the availability of daycare, convenience, social factors, and the range of quality of interscholastic

sports. A study completed by Saporito and Lareau (1999) examining how families in an urban setting make choices, within the context of school choice programs, they found evidence that race is a very powerful force in guiding family choice. Specifically, white families tend to avoid schools with higher percentages of African American students. In contrast, the African American families place no significance on school racial composition when making their school choice. In in-depth interviews with African American families, race appeared to be a less powerful factor for African American families than white families; but, some parents stated that they sought racially diverse settings.

In their discussions of school choice, policy advocates offer the idea that the decision making process of how families choose a school is a simple one. They presume that when families make choices they consider all the schools in the selection pool in equal terms. Under this analysis, parents consider a set of school characteristics (i.e., SAT scores, safety of neighborhood, and school size), weigh each of them equally and rate each and every possible school using these criteria. According to Sarporito and Laureau (1999), this single-stage model is flawed; suggesting a different pattern in which families of different races make school choice in a series of steps. It seems as if white parents never consider all schools in the district. Some schools were immediately excluded. These schools were excluded not on the basis of their educational characteristics, but on the basis of socially salient criteria (i.e., racial composition). This suggests that in the school selection process all of the factors and all schools are not considered simultaneously and equally. Unlike white families, African American families did not appear, as a group, to eliminate schools from consideration using a single criteria; some spoke of safety, others of academic quality, and others emphasized college preparation as factors that influenced school selection. African American families did tend to avoid schools with



higher proportions of poverty (Sarporito & Lareau, 1999). This study suggests that the decision making processes is very different for blacks and whites and is a multi-step process. There is a *first-order* decision where parents exclude some schools from consideration. Then there is a *second-order* decision where parents consider a variety of factors and select a school (Sarporito & Lareau, 1999). An analysis of parents' use of an internet database to gather information on schools found that parents were very concerned with school demographics (Buckley & Schneider, 2003).

**What Do Parents Value in Schools?** Schooling is a complex endeavor with multiple outcomes. Several studies have examined the factors that influence parents' choices among schools. Most of this work relies on surveys that ask parents to describe the criteria they use when choosing a school, whereas other studies examine actual choice behavior. This review of literature is intended to summarize the major findings.

A study that examined an inter-district choice program in Massachusetts cited high standards and curriculum as top reasons given by both parents and students for choosing a school (Armor & Peiser, 2000). Other studies of charter schools and magnet schools provided additional evidence of the importance of academic quality in parental decision-making (Goldring & Shapira, 1997). In an article that provides evidence concerning the value parents place on charter schools, Vanderhoff (2008) finds that parents in New Jersey chose charter schools based primarily on academic effectiveness and endorsement of academic goals. Through this survey analysis the evidence indicated that a 10 percent increase in a charter school's test scores will increase the number of students on its wait list by at least 63 percent.

By extending new educational opportunities to families with children in underperforming public schools, NCLB gives parents greater influence over their child's education, but some

parents may not choose schools solely based on academic strength. Other factors related to safety, location, and discipline is also important values perceived by parents. Howell's (2006) assessment of the criteria parents used to select schools in underperforming districts was found to be consistent with previous survey research. The most important qualities of a school to parents were quality of teaching, discipline, safety and order, and classes offered. Location, racial-ethnic composition, and the prevalence of friends were the least important.

Other work, however, indicates that parental preferences may vary as a function of racial, ethnic, and socioeconomic background. According to Vanderhoff (2008), parents in neighborhoods with lower incomes were especially concerned with safety and hours of instruction, while parents in richer areas were concerned with the number of honors classes offered. Mark Schneider and colleagues have done extensive work on intra-district school choice in both urban and suburban school districts, and their work suggests that parental preferences differ in many ways based on race, socioeconomic, and ethnic background (Schneider et al., 2000). Survey results that indicated that low-socioeconomic-status (SES) and minority parents are more concerned with safety and test scores than are high-SES and white parents (Howell, 2006). The findings related to test scores build on previous research that has found that racial minorities and parents from low SES groups are more concerned with their children learning the "basics". According to Schneider et.al. (1998) earning the basics is assumed by these families to be what their children need the most to propel them to higher education and economic success. Based on these findings, researchers argue that racial and social stratification may occur because minority and low-income parents stress a different set of values in education and choose schools that reflect the fundamental and different dimensions of education they view as important. A 1998 Public Agenda survey, found that low income and

minority parents appeared to value academic quality as much as high-income and nonminority parents (Farkas & Johnson, 1998).

Parents' definition of educational quality may not solely be in reference to test scores, but instead may involve a broader notion of factors that contribute to student achievement. For example, one study found that, overall, parents are almost three times as likely to value teacher quality over high test scores within a school (Schneider et al., 2000). Similarly, parents participating in a focus group as part of a choice program in Washington, D.C., were highly concerned about the academic environments of the schools their children attended but less concerned about academic outcomes such as test scores (Stewart, Wolf, & Cornman, 2005). Parents must rely on information that is readily available to them, and it is likely that parents have more information related to test scores than teacher quality.

The literature is consistent in pinpointing academic quality as the top criterion for why parents say they choose a particular school. There have been, however, some inconsistencies related to how parents act rather than what they say. Several studies show, for example, that the racial composition and socioeconomic status of charter schools appears to matter more when choosing schools than parents let on in surveys of preferences (Hamilton & Guinn, 2005). In one study, parents participating in a public school choice program in Minneapolis preferred schools that were in close proximity to their homes and where their children would be in the racial majority. Additionally, the socioeconomic status of school peers was an important predictor of the school chosen (Glazerman, 1997). This evidence is consistent with findings of a study on enrollment patterns for a magnet school program in Montgomery County, Maryland, where parents selected schools that closely mirrored their own racial and socioeconomic status (Henig, 1990). Research on the open-enrollment program in Massachusetts, in which 95 percent of

participating students were white, found that parents were most likely to move their children to districts with higher median incomes, adult population education levels, and per pupil spending (Fossey, 1994). These findings suggest that racial composition rarely plays a role in parents' choice of schools. The conclusion of this review of the literature is consistent in pinpointing academic quality as the top criterion for why parents report that they choose a particular school. However, there is some research that shows parents also value factors related to racial composition, ethnicity, and socioeconomic as variables that influence school choice.

**How Do Parents Obtain Information?** A critical factor influencing parental choice behavior is the quality of information available to parents on schools operating within the choice system (Hamilton & Guinn, 2005). The choice of a particular school is likely to be influenced by the weighted set of preferences that each parent has regarding desired attributes of schools. These weights may influence how parents choose, but only to the extent that valid and accessible information is available on each attribute. This is true for those parents who are making a choice rationally. By having a set of preferences, they search for a school to fit their desires. Hill, Pierce, and Guthrie (1997), who support limited school choice, argue the necessity for parents to have adequate information to choose a school: "In education as in health care, consumers do not have as much information as the professionals, and are therefore at a disadvantage" (pp. 63 – 64). The question is how do parents obtain information about schools? From whom or where does this information come from?

Some parents may rely exclusively on public reporting systems, whereas others may use their personal networks to gather opinions and inside information on schools, and some may even visit and observe in schools before making a choice (Hamilton & Guinn, 2005). Indeed, social networks, including extended family and friends, are primary source of information about

schools for many parents (Beales & Wahl, 1995). A study commissioned by *Education Week* explores the information needs of parents and other taxpayers through focus groups. Both parents and taxpayers expressed the desire for school-level reports that provide a mix of quantitative and qualitative information, particularly on topics related school safety, teacher qualifications, and academic achievement (Washington, 1998).

Sources used to obtain information may vary by parent characteristics (Hamilton & Guinn, 2005). Research on intra-district choice found that race and level of education appear to affect the type of information parents find useful when selecting a school (Schneider et al., 2000). Parents with higher levels of education rely more on social or informal forms of information. Parents with lower levels of education, as well as African American and Hispanic parents, tend to have less-informative social networks and are more likely to rely on formal sources of information, such as the media. Researchers also argue that less-informed parents may use basic visual cues, such as school cleanliness, as a shortcut to identifying quality schools (Schneider & Buckley, 2002). The NCLB legislation requires schools to report test scores for racial, ethnic, and socioeconomic subgroups and to provide limited information on teacher quality in School Report Cards. According to Hamilton and Guinn (2000), as parents become accustomed to having this type of data readily available, their propensity to use this information will almost certainly increase, though there may continue to be differences in access to information across groups. The School Report Cards data are sent to parents, summarized in local news papers, and reported on the websites of major newspapers and the Department of Education. Most of the variables are reported at the school level for three academic years. Understanding how parents obtain and use information to inform their choice of a school is beneficial for exploring the school choice process.

## Summary

Charter schools have been aimed at breaking the mold of the large urban school and promoted as a way to restructure urban public education from within (Fusarelli, 1999). Many charter schools have been established in urban areas. Charter school laws in Missouri are limited to the St. Louis and Kansas City school districts. Arguments for school choice rests on the assumption that giving parents choice should ultimately change the schools themselves by making better “products” available to parents to choose from. Charter schools are often seen as a central tool to leverage such change as the improvement of public schools (e.g., Hill, Pierce, & Guthrie, 1997; Hoxby, 2000; Teske, Schneider, Buckley, & Clark, 2000). Parents with children in underperforming public schools are more than twice as likely to name a preferred alternative public school in their district or a charter school than are parents with children in schools that made AYP (Howell, 2006). Finally, and probably most importantly, public schools are commonly perceived to be in such a bad state that people are looking to implement any program that might help to bring about improvements (Goldhaber, 1999). The purpose of this study is to understand why parents in Kansas City, Missouri choose charter schools and how they go about making the decision on one school over another.

As the review of literature has demonstrated and articulated, numerous studies have indicated many factors that can lead parents to seek out alternative public schools as their school of choice. The continuing growth of public charter schools remains a parental option to TPS. Academic factors have consistently been named as the most important criteria as parents seek out schools of choice. Very few parents admit that racial and other social factors are just as important in their decision, but there is some evidence to support that these are used as determinants. It was also found in the literature that parents obtain information about schools

through formal and informal sources. Formal sources include School Report Cards and school websites. Informal sources would include social networks i.e. friends, family, and community members. One purpose of this study is to understand how parents obtain information about schools and how this information is used in the decision making process when choosing a charter school in Kansas City, Missouri.

## **Chapter 3**

### **Research Design and Methodology**

Chapter 3 contains a description of the methods and procedures used in this study; it is arranged in five sections: (a) study context & participant selection, (b) a description Benjamin Banneker Charter Academy, (c) the research questions, (d) the study, and (e) research and methodology.

#### **Study Context & Participant Selection**

In order to study parental perceptions and decision making processes, I solicited parent participation from those parents who have chosen Benjamin Banneker Charter Academy of Technology, one of the lowest performing charter schools in KC as the educational option for their child. The participants in this study consisted of parents who have actively chosen to send their children to one specific public charter school in Kansas City, Missouri, instead of the traditional school in the neighborhood. The parents may have previously had children in the KCPS or may have only chosen a charter school. Most importantly their current school of choice is Benjamin Banneker charter school.

The sample of this study consisted of parents who actively chose to attend a public charter school instead of the traditional public school in their neighborhood. Specifically, this study consisted of the following respondents: 20 parents who made the decision for their children to attend Benjamin Banneker Charter Academy, 4 school staff members who volunteered to participate in an interview to describe their perceptions about parental choice in Kansas City. All of the respondents targeted for this study volunteered to participate in the interviews. Parents and administrator interviews lasted from 30 minutes to one hour. All interviews were conducted in person.



## **Description of the Public Charter School**

The public charter school selected for this study is Benjamin Banneker Charter Academy of Technology. Benjamin Banneker Charter Academy of Technology, a Pre-K – 8<sup>th</sup> grade school, serves over three hundred fifty students. The school is located at 6401 Rockhill Road, Kansas City, Missouri. The charter supports rigorous accountability of students' growth and achievement as measured by state and national standards. Educational achievement is tracked through trimester curriculum objectives that are aligned to the Missouri Learning Standards, and the state's annual assessment, Missouri Assessment Program (MAP). Banneker's urban-focused school is committed to high academic outcomes with the infusion of technology for each student. High standards for social, physical, and intellectual development are maintained, which allows children to experience success in a safe, challenging, and exciting setting. Technology is critical and central to the learning of all students. The academic programs provide meaningful learning experiences helping children develop higher order skills to function in a world beyond the classroom. Students are engaged in Science, Technology, Engineering, Arts, and Math (STEAM) activities throughout each day.

The Benjamin Banneker Charter Academy of Technology (Banneker), formerly known as Benjamin Banneker Magnet Elementary School, has its roots in the magnet school program operated by the Kansas City Missouri School District (KCPS), opening its doors in 1990. As a part of the desegregation lawsuit and related court orders, KCPS implemented a number of magnet programs to provide students and parents innovative educational program options (Sluder, Thomas, & Snyder, 2001). As a magnet school within the KCPS, the school had an enrollment of 585 students with 97% of the population being minority. The school was faced with challenges that were common to schools in urban areas, i.e. low attendance rates and low

achievement scores on the state's annual assessment. Parents were frustrated and disappointed with services provided by the school system (Sluder, Thomas, & Snyder, 2001).

In 1998, the principal of Benjamin Banneker Magnet Elementary, Esther Richey, believed the charter school option would be a viable option for the parents, students, and the staff, (Sluder, Thomas, & Snyder, 2001). During the planning and development stages of converting from a magnet school to a charter school, KCPS would serve as the school's sponsor. At the district's request, parents and staff members were surveyed to determine the level of support for the chartering venture. Staff survey results were mixed, with approximately half of the existing staff supporting the charter conversion. The results of the parents' survey strongly favored the conversion to charter, with over 70 percent of the parents responding positively to the charter option. KCPS eventually ruled out conversion of the conversion. The belief that a charter school could be created that would include student accountability, organizational flexibility, curricular innovation, parental choice, parent-teacher involvement, and community partnerships prompted the movement that resulted in the creation of Benjamin Banneker Charter Academy of Technology. The charter was approved on April 22, 1999 by its sponsor, Central Missouri State University. In the fall of 1999, Banneker opened its doors as a K-6 school to 300 students. The average class size was 15 per class. At the most fundamental level, Banneker is a school of choice.

Currently, Banneker serves approximately 357 students and families from throughout the Kansas City metro area (DESE, 2015). Charter school law mandates that students must live within the boundaries of the Kansas City Missouri School District. Table 1 provides a summary of the school's total enrollment trends over the past three years. The total population is described as 99.7% African American. As a Title 1 school, 100% of all its students are eligible for the free

and reduced lunch program. It receives federal financial funding to support instructional and curricular services to all of its students under the program. Sixty (60) dedicated staff members serve the student population.

Table 1

*Enrollment Trends and Free and Reduced Lunch Recipients: Numbers and Percentages of Students by Year*

<u>Grade Level</u>	<u>2013</u>	<u>2014</u>	<u>2015</u>
PreK	27	25	20
Kindergarten	35	55	42
1 <sup>st</sup> grade	39	40	43
2 <sup>nd</sup> grade	35	52	44
3 <sup>rd</sup> grade	35	37	41
4 <sup>th</sup> grade	52	42	40
5 <sup>th</sup> grade	40	43	38
6 <sup>th</sup> grade	30	39	34
7 <sup>th</sup> grade	48	24	29
8 <sup>th</sup> grade	27	40	18
Total Enrollment	341	372	335
Total Enrollment by Race: Black	95%	100%	100%
Free/Reduced Lunch Recipients	96.2%	100%	100%

The charter school, (Banneker), selected for this study is a PreK-8<sup>th</sup> grade community of diverse learners. It is located in the heart of a business district and characterized as low to lower class, as many of the residents are below the poverty line. The building is surrounded by an array of business establishments. Banneker is also centrally located between various other higher performing charter schools, i.e., Hogan Preparatory Academy, University Academy, Frontier Academy of Innovations, Brookside Academy, and Academy of Lafayette.

**Assessment Information.** Each spring, this school along with every other school in the state participates in the Missouri Assessment Program (MAP) test. The MAP test assesses students' progress toward mastery of the Show-Me Standards which are the educational standards in Missouri. The grade-level assessment is a yearly standards-based test that measures specific skills defined for each grade by the state of Missouri. All students in grades 3-8 in Missouri will take the grade level assessment. English Language Arts and Mathematics are administered in all grades. Science is administered in grades 5 and 8.

Parents are involved in preparation of the students for the MAP test. The school ensures that parents are aware of the mandate for each student to take the MAP test. Schools are required to mail a letter from DESE to all of the parents with pertinent information about the MAP test (See Appendix F).

**Recruitment.** One of the most important factors in creating and sustaining a viable charter school is the ability to recruit and retain students. Financial support for charter schools in Missouri comes from the state and federal governments, based on per-pupil allotment.

The school choice movement has taken hold in Kansas City, and families have a number of options of elementary schools to high schools. The competition created by these options makes it especially important that each charter school have a strong student recruitment program. Charter schools use various strategies during the recruitment process: paid advertisement on local television and radio stations, going door-to-door, attending community meetings to promote the school, and mass mailings to target neighborhoods.

The recruitment process for Banneker consists of two major strategies: school visits and information sessions. Open enrollment begins the first week of March and continues until all

grade levels are filled. Once each grade level is completely filled, all other applicants are placed on a waiting list.

**School Visits.** Very few parents actually stated that they made their decision of school choice based on what they perceived about the school after a school visit. One parent described visiting various schools before making her decision actually decided against the school after visiting. She was displeased with the appearance of the school and the overall culture seemed really chaotic. The parents that visited Banneker before they enrolled their child were really pleased with what they observed. A school visit usually consists of a tour with the Parent Liaison. During the walk-through of the building there is a visit to classrooms, introduction of various staff members, visiting the cafeteria, playground and discussions about curriculum and activities. Parents have the opportunity to have all of the questions answered and complete an enrollment application during this time. Based on the Parent Liaison's account about 90% of the parents who come for a tour decide to enroll. There are plans in place to begin tracking this information during the 2016-2017 school year.

**Information Sessions.** Information sessions are offered to parents at least twice a month beginning the spring semester each school when enrollment begins. Enrollment begins in March. These sessions are normally held on Saturdays and offer parents more information about the school. During the sessions parents are given a tour of the building while discussing curriculum, extracurricular activities, transportation, and any other concerns they may have. The main selling points are the academics, technology, and leadership. Staff members for each grade level and administrators are usually there to greet and meet parents. Many tactics are used to attract parents to these events, i.e., food, carnival rides, and prizes. Parents are not required to

attend informational sessions to be enrolled. These sessions are usually offered on Saturdays for parents who may work late and/or simply cannot attend during the week.

**Application Process.** In order for a student to attend the parent must complete and enrollment application. The following documents must be provided before the application is complete: proof of residency, driver's license, immunization records, birth certificate, and school records from the previous school. The application asks for biographical data, medical history, consent form to request records from previous school, language survey, homeless survey, and commitment to complete 30 hours of parent volunteer hours.

All new enrollees and current students must complete the enrollment packet. Current students are given their packets to take home. Re-enrollment incentives are usually offered in the form of monetary gifts or gift cards. Parents are encouraged to complete the re-enrollment application as early as possible so their child can secure a spot for the upcoming school year. Preference is given to siblings of students who are already enrolled in the school. As space becomes available students are moved up on the waiting list in the order the applications are received. The Enrollment Clerk tracks the time of enrollment and completion of applications.

**Background of Kansas City Public School District.** Kansas City Public Schools (KCPS) was organized in 1867 and originally served 2,150 children. Today, the school system educates more than 14,000 children in grades K-12 and employs nearly 2,300 teachers and administrators. From 1960 – 2015, enrollment in KCPS has drastically declined from more than 68,000 to a little over 14,500 in 2015. Charter schools continue to provide increasing competition to KCPS schools. Unlike charter schools in many other states, the charter schools in Kansas City are not authorized by the school district in which they are located, and charter

schools can make any and all decisions without authorization from KCPS. Student enrollment in KCPS has decreased, which charter school enrollment has increased.

### **Research Methodology**

The method of study used for this research was a qualitative study method. Qualitative research is a means for exploring and understanding the meaning individuals or groups ascribe to a social or human problem (Creswell, 2003). Qualitative research methods allow for a rich description of people, places, and conversations (Bodgan & Biklen, 2003) and allows the researcher to understand how other people see the structure and meaning of their daily lives (Berg, 2006). In order to better understand the perceptions, decision making, and experiences of parents who have actively chosen charter schools, parents of students enrolled in a charter school in KCPS have been interviewed by using open-ended questions. A qualitative strategy is appropriate for this type of study because it was used to explore why and how parents decided to enroll a child/children in one specific charter school as their educational choice in Kansas City, Missouri.

**Research Questions.** Open-ended interview questions were utilized to gain insight into the decision making processes of parents and perceptions about charter schools in KCPS. The questions are designed to allow parents and opportunity to open up about their experiences in choosing a school. The interview was not be limited by these questions alone. The following research questions were used to guide this study:

1. How do parents gather information about schools?
2. What specific qualities, programs, or activities at the school were of most interest to parents?

3. How do parents weigh the school's test data versus their child's individual test data when making enrollment/re-enrollment decisions?

**Participant Selection: Sample.** Purposeful sampling (n=20) was used for the recruitment of participants for this study. Purposeful sampling is commonly used in qualitative research. It involves selecting research participants according to the needs of the study (Glaser & Stauss, 2009) in that researchers choose participants who give a richness of information that is suitable for detailed research (Patton, 1980). In this strategy, particular settings, persons, or activities are selected deliberately to provide information that is particularly relevant to the questions and goals, and that can't be gotten as well from other choices (Maxwell, 2013). The participants have been purposively selected because of their unique experiences as parents who have actively chosen and currently have chosen a charter school as the educational choice for their child. Parents who have chosen a charter school will have first-hand knowledge pertaining to personal school choice. Charter schools in Kansas City have to be located within the boundaries of the KCPS. Therefore the selected parents could have chosen a traditional public school rather than a charter school.

The researcher did seek out parents who currently have their children enrolled in Benjamin Banneker Charter Academy of Technology. The only parents selected for interviewing are parents who currently have a child enrolled in Benjamin Banneker Charter Academy of Technology, a public charter school in Kansas City. The topic for research was introduced to the parents at parent meetings and posted in the school's newsletter along with contact information for the researcher. The parents who were interested in participating in a face-to-face interview contacted the researcher to volunteer to be interviewed.



KCPS is currently provisionally accredited based on the most recent state assessment scores. The Superintendent at that time, Dr. Greene, made promises that the district would be fully accredited within the next two years. Increasing test scores and what seems to be stable leadership could have drawn parents back into the district, but hundreds of parents kept their children enrolled in charter schools that are performing below KCPS. For this reason, parents of students enrolled in a charter school have been interviewed. The participants of this study can help us to understand academic and non-academic reasons for enrolling in a charter school.

**Data Collection.** Data collection was completed through the use of in-depth face-to-face interviews, parent satisfaction surveys, and observation data.

**Interviews.** All interviews (parents, classified staff, and administrators) were tape-recorded and later transcribed for analysis. An interview is a purposeful conversation that is directed by one to get information from the other while allowing an interview to take on a shape of its own (Bogdan & Biklen, 2003). This research study included an interview with each respondent. An interview is used to “gather descriptive data in the subjects’ own words so that the researcher can develop insights on how subjects interpret some piece of the world” (Bogdan & Biklen, 2003, p.95).

Individual interviews with parents, classified staff, and the school administrators may be the best method to investigate about perceptions and personal opinions on issues that relate to school choice, school characteristics, and their reasons for their decisions. Qualitative research methods allow for a rich description of people, places, and conversations (Bogdan & Biklen, 2003) and allows the researcher to understand how other people see the structure and meaning of their daily lives (Berg, 2006).

Of the 30 staff members, 4 staff members were interviewed. It was necessary to explore information that they gathered from the community's perceptions about the school as well as to understand the staff contribution to the school's climate and how it relates to the perceptions of the parents. The interviews were used to assess the validity of the parent's perceptions. I wanted a secondary perspective as to what parents are saying to staff about why parents are choosing Banneker. These staff interviews lasted from 30 – 60 minutes and were conducted face-to-face.

Twenty parents agreed to participate in the individual interviews. The interviews lasted approximately 30 minutes to 1 hour. A subsequent follow-up interview, lasting 20 – 30 minutes, was also conducted when necessary. All interviews were scheduled at the parent's convenience, either personally on school premises, by telephone, or on a visit to their home. The questions for this interview guide emerged from a review of the literature on a variety of alternative public school choices and characteristics which parent's value in schools. The interview guide allowed for the respondent to shape some of the direction of the interview while continuing coverage of the topic to allow for comparison. Interviews occurred during the spring semester of May, 2014 – August, 2016. Follow-up interviews were completed from July, 2016 – August, 2016. The parents were contacted via telephone and requested to complete face-to-face follow up interviews in order to gather additional data pertaining to the school's academic data from state test scores. Only five of the original parents were contacted due to my inability to get in touch with the other parents. Many of the telephone numbers were no longer working. Follow-up interviews were conducted at the school strictly on a voluntary basis.

***Social desirability bias.*** Social desirability bias is the desire of respondents to project a favorable image to the researcher by answering questions in a manner that they believe would be desirable to the researcher. Because I work as a school administrator at Benjamin Banneker I

wanted to avoid this type of bias. In an effort to overcome the social desirability bias, I took several steps to help the parents feel comfortable with stating their true feelings about Benjamin Banneker. First of all, I tried to reassure the parents that the interview questions were a part of my own research project in order to fulfill requirements for my doctoral degree and that their answers would not have any negative influence on their child's enrollment status. I explained to them that there is no right or wrong answers to the questions so that they would understand that any response would be perfectly acceptable. I also used the consent letter to express to the parents that all information would be treated confidentially, and their individual identity would be protected.

***Collection of artifacts and other documents.*** In conjunction with the staff and parent interviews, I also collected and examined documents (e.g., mission and visions, letters of intent and parent survey results). The information further enlightened me in studying parental perceptions in relationship with staff perceptions as to why parents chose Banneker as their school of choice. This connection was essential in establishing a link between initial parental perceptions, which led to their choice of the school, and staff interactions and perceptions about parental choice. I also examined a detailed list of programs, test scores, and awards, as well as the school calendar, which served as a reference in investigating school characteristics and variables that influenced parents to make an informed choice.

***Parent satisfaction survey.*** Most charter schools employ annual parent satisfaction surveys to examine parental perceptions and their children's school experiences. The surveys focus on at least five areas: (1) quality of staff; (2) school climate; (3) academic programs; (social development and extracurricular activities; (5) parent involvement. Parents were asked to respond to a series of questions on a 5-point Likert format on the school's reputation, school

safety, teachers, educational support, school environment, and other teaching and learning variables. Parents marked their comments using the following criteria: strongly disagree, disagree, neutral, agree, and strongly agree. The parental satisfaction survey is essential in determining the experiences and opinions of parents about the school. Additional data obtained from these surveys was useful in understanding areas of satisfaction or dissatisfaction, experiences, and factors that influenced choice of their school. Parent satisfaction survey data is collected in the spring of each school year. The information was obtained from the school's administrator. This information is being used as an additional data source to understand parental perceptions and decision making. It is important to have an insight into the prevailing sentiments of parents and connect these with their level of satisfaction with their educational choice for their child. The scoring of this survey data and the analysis of relevant themes also help to provide parallel an analysis. The parent survey data is the most recent survey data as it was administered in January, 2015 to 134 parents.

***Firsthand observation data.*** Firsthand observation played a very minor role in this study. The researcher observed information sessions, recruiting events, and parent meetings for the purpose of better understanding the recruitment strategy and parent concerns. Notes from the session were analyzed to determine if information shared or questions asked pointed to decision making based upon school academic achievement indicators or school non-academic indicators. This information helped to triangulate the data gathered via the primary methodology of the study – in-depth interviewing.

**Analysis of Data.** Merriam (1998) and Marshall and Rossman (1989) contend that data collection and analysis must be a simultaneous process in qualitative research. They claim that qualitative data analysis entails classifying things, persons, and events and the properties that

characterize them. After reading all the interviews, I created brief descriptive summary statements arising from common categories. The Likert-type survey administered to parents was also included in this process for parallel analysis. The responses were identified as units and then compressed into briefer statements in which the main sense of what was stated was further rephrased into brief and overriding themes. This process also allowed me to align common themes and create brief descriptive summary statements of which I was able to interpret stakeholders' perceived patterns and relationships of the variables that parents sought in choosing this charter school. I then subjected my research questions to my data categories and themes to determine if I had enough information to substantiate my findings and make implications. In order to detect potential bias in my categorization process, I asked a colleague to review one of the raw interviews and suggest appropriate ways to categorize the data. Validation was solicited from the participants to compare the researcher's descriptive results with their lived experiences. Triangulation from different data sources was used to build a coherent justification for the themes. Member checking was utilized to determine the accuracy of the findings through taking the final report or specific descriptions or themes back to participants to determine accuracy (Creswell, 2003).

**Ethical Considerations.** The researcher must protect the research participants by developing trust, promoting the integrity of the research, guarding against misconduct and any impropriety that might reflect on the institution, and cope with new challenging problems (Creswell, 2003). First and foremost, the researcher has an obligation to respect the rights, needs, values, and desires of the participants. Additionally, the reputation and position of the participants are visible, especially since the findings of the study could be shared with other people and organizations.

The following safeguards were used to protect the participants' rights:

1. Participants were advised in writing of the voluntary nature of their participation and that they could withdraw from the study at any time without penalty. They were also advised that at any time during the process they could decline to answer any question.
2. The research objectives were clearly delineated in writing and articulated to the participants.
3. A written consent form was obtained from each participant.
4. The participants were informed in writing of all data collection methods and activities.
5. Written transcriptions and interpretations of the data were made available to the participants.

## **Chapter 4**

### **Findings**

#### **Overview**

This study investigated the perceptions that led parents to send their children to Benjamin Banneker Charter Academy (Banneker), a public charter school in Kansas City, Missouri. I interviewed parents because of their choice of Banneker. The selected parents could explain their perceptions of Banneker and give detailed reasons as to why they chose this school over other TPS or other charter schools. I also interviewed staff members due to their unique experiences in working with the parents. The experiences of the staff should inform the study in a way that will help to understand parental perceptions and basis of parental choice of Banneker. I want to know specifically from the staff members the types of information parents seek and their understanding of parental perceptions of Banneker as a school of choice.

After reading all the interviews, I transcribed them and created brief descriptive summary statements arising from common categories. The responses were identified as units and then compressed into briefer statements in which the main sense of what was said was further rephrased into brief and overriding themes. I was able to interpret stakeholders' perceived patterns of preferred characteristics by aligning common themes. I also used a constant comparative method to further exhaust my data analysis (Strauss & Corbin, 1990). The highlights of these findings included the following: (a) parents had little to no knowledge of charter schools before enrolling their child there; (b) parents perceive the science & technology theme of the school as significant for their child's readiness for high school, college and/or future career paths; (c) parents listed more non-academic/social characteristics over academic characteristics, i.e., a welcoming environment, relationship with teachers and administration, and

safety as characteristics that they value most over state test data; (d) parents prefer charter schools over TPS because of academic and non-academic reasons; and (e) parents often make enrollment decisions based on word of mouth from family and friends, very few parents seek information about test scores and/or the school's academic ratings; (f) the parents in this study have negative perceptions of KCPS schools; (g) an explanation on how parents weigh academic information versus other characteristics when making enrollment/re-enrollment decisions. Parents often report that they choose schools for academic reasons, but in reality they choose for various other reasons that are deemed just as important to the parents.

Most research on charter school choice is related to student achievement and the types of students who attend these schools. However, if parents are considered consumers in the market place of school choice, then it is important to analyze the behaviors and processes parents utilize to choose what they see as the best school for their children. I believe it is especially important to understand the decision making process of parents in this urban areas where TPS have not performed well academically, neither are some of the charter schools. In some cases, such as with Benjamin Banneker Charter Academy of Technology, (Banneker), the TPS in Kansas City are outperforming some of the charter schools on the annual state test.

This topic is important to me because charter school competition can only work as a policy to improve public education if schools that do not contribute to this goal are not allowed to remain open. If parents cease from enrolling their children in schools that are not performing well academically, then those schools would cease to exist. State governing agencies periodically review charter schools and may rescind the charter if a school does not attract enough students. Hence, like firms in a competitive market, charter schools can fail due to the inability to satisfy customer demands for a quality education. My personal objective in completing this research is



to gain an understanding of why and how parents choose particular schools, even if those schools are not performing well on state tests.

This research is not about whether parents can make the best choice of schools for their children or not. Although opponents of school choice do not believe that this is the case. I believe parents make the best choice for their children. I also believe that parents are the best ones to make the right choice for their child based on specific needs. Sometimes what is best is based on the parents needs, yet other times it's based on the needs of the students. For example, some parents choose schools because of the convenience. Maybe the school is conveniently located, and the parent feels assured they could get there quickly in case of emergencies. In other cases, the student may have special needs, whereby the parent feels more satisfied that the child's specific needs are always being attended to. These are just some examples as to why parents choose schools. School choice is easily one of the most controversial education policy issues of our time. It involves the process of taking the control of education away from school boards and state legislatures and replacing it with the freedom of the market (Smith & Meier, 1995). Choice encourages innovation and promotes the direct involvement of families. Giving parent's choice as to where to send their children has rapidly gained popularity across the United States.

The purpose of this research is not to make judgments about whose role it is to make the choice or whether the parent's choice is right or wrong, good or bad. However, this research is about the processes in which parents use to choose a school and to understand if and/or how parents weigh academic data in making the choice. The purpose of this study is to examine why parents choose, how they make school choice decisions and the dynamics of the choice process with an emphasis on parents who have chosen Benjamin Banneker Charter Academy of

Technology, a lower performing charter school, over TPS in the KCPS district. The focus of examining parental choice of charter schools in Kansas City is important because of the continued interest of parents in choosing lower performing charter schools as a school choice option for their children. This chapter addresses the information obtained through interviews in addressing the following research questions that guided this study: (a) How do parents gather information about schools? (b) What reasons did parents give for choosing Banneker? (c) How do parents weigh the school's test data versus their child's individual test data when making enrollment/re-enrollment decisions? A brief summary of the data in the respondent's perceptions conclude each area of the findings.

### **Parents Have Negative Perceptions of KCPS**

These negative perceptions were based on some facts and some opinions. Some parents based their opinions of KCPS on their past experience as a student, while others had had poor experiences with the school district as a parent. Furthermore the district has had a lot of negative media for years, specifically surrounding the issue of low academic performance, accreditation, and frequent turnover in leadership. Regardless of whether or not there is a possibility that KCPS has changed, in the minds of the parents things have not changed at all. Parents still perceive the schools as KCPS as a poor choice for them. Moreover, when the parents were given an option to choose outside of the district, they took advantage of it and transferred their students to charter schools. In one case, at least for this parent she chose to home-school her son when they moved into the city from a suburban district. Mrs. Jordan explained it this way:

When my youngest child was about to begin school at the age of 6, I knew that I did not want him in Kansas City district schools because of all the negative news about the district. My oldest went through Grandview schools and once we moved into the city, I actually did not enroll him in the school system. I home-schooled him because I just didn't have the confidence in the schools.

**Negative Perceptions are based on Experiences.** Many of the parents that were interviewed attended school in KCPS district at some point growing up. They spoke very negatively about the quality of education that they received while attending the traditional district schools in KCPS. Moreover, it was these personal experiences that caused them to seek, in their words a “better or different” education for their child. The following statements are reflections parents gave for reasons for not enrolling children in KCPS based on their own experience as a student:

Ms. Nelson, a parent with four children enrolled in Banneker reflected on her own choice processes:

From my experience what I went through in public school; I went to an environmental science school when I was in elementary school and when I came to Kansas City School District, the work became a little easier. Like here at Banneker I feel like it challenges the children more here and they’re on the higher learning level compared to the Kansas City School District is not challenging enough so this is why I continue to come here.

Ms. Lockton stated:

I thought about enrolling in the ACE (African-Centered School in KCPS), but I don’t know. My niece started here in kindergarten and she’s been here ever since. Westport was a charter school and I went there. The charter schools are just different from the public school. We learned more than the friends I had at Southeast, (school in KCPS). You could tell the difference between what I was learning at a charter schools, and what they were learning at the public schools. Charter schools were better because of the way the teachers teach. I liked the way the information was taught a lot better.

All of the parents stated that they exercised the right to choose an alternative to the TPS in KCPS based on the perceived deficiencies of those schools and personal experience with the schools. Many of the parents attended KCPS as a student. However, they do not believe they received a quality education in the district school. They now have the power to exercise the right to choose an alternative for their children, and they feel good about the right to do so. When given the opportunity to explain why they didn’t enroll in the traditional school, the majority of

the parents expressed deep disgust for KCPS for various reasons. Parents were motivated to find a school that they thought would provide a higher quality of education than the one they received as a student in the district schools.

**Negative Perceptions Based on Accreditation Issues.** After years of poor academic performance, KCPS lost its accreditation in 2012, but gained provisional accreditation in 2014 under the leadership of Dr. Stephen Green. Dr. Green resigned from KCPS as of July, 2015, and the board was faced with launching the search for new leadership once again. Based on interview data from this research, parents admitted to basing their perceptions of KCPS from personal experience, either as a parent or a former student and/or negative media coverage.

In some cases, the parent's negative perceptions were based on the history of the KCPS's loss of accreditation, negative news coverage, and the revolving door of Superintendents who have been in and out of the district. Although parents did not understand what it means for a school to be unaccredited, the majority of the parents criticized KCPS for not being accredited and having too frequent turnover in the position of the Superintendent. Ms. Stork spoke very passionately about her child's school closing and lack of accreditation:

I wasn't fooling with Kansas City school district because they didn't tell me anything. I just knew that they were not accredited, and I know what I went through in the public school and I didn't like it. So I just said I'm going to try something different.

**Negative Perceptions Surrounding School Culture.** The large class sizes, safety and discipline concerns, and many other challenges facing the public schools prompted parents to choose an alternative educational option for their child. It is the variables mentioned above that are signs of dissatisfaction with the TPS. These perceptions are consistent with previous and current research that the escalating challenges facing TPS present parents a reason to exercise

their options and choose alternative schools (Bracey, 2007; Causey-Bush, 2005; Center for Education Reform, 2003; Conley, 2007; Finn, 2006).

Mrs. Barkley explained emphatically:

I went to a public school my whole life, so I know the safety issues and what goes on with children in the schools. That's what made me research charter schools because I wanted something different for my babies. I did not want them to go through the same things that I went through. So, when I started researching, I found out that they have their own boards. I won't have to go downtown to talk to someone who was not familiar with the teachers or the students in the schools. That was important for me to know.

Prior studies have shown that parents will continue to search for the best school for their children – the one they believe will provide the best learning environment and also prepare their children for adult life (Hoxby, 2000). All of the parents stated that they would do everything to find the best school for their child. Mrs. Jordan emphatically stated:

From where I lived the majority of the kids that my son associated with went to school in KCPS, so things that I heard or talked to the parents about at that time, I could not find one that, I heard anything positive about. According to what I knew and heard from others, there was more time being spent on discipline issues than learning. When I was in a smaller district, I was very active in the school and built relationships with everyone, but I didn't feel that going to a larger district would facilitate that type of relationship. I wanted to have complete control of my child's education. That's why I chose a charter school over a school in the Kansas City School District.

**Why are parents interested in charter schools?** Parents are intrigued and attracted to charter schools as a choice because it is their choice. Being able to choose a school for their children was not something that most of their parents were privileged to do. Many of the parents attended KCPS as a student and used their experience as grounds to choose otherwise for their children. The market of schools in Kansas City consists of the schools in KCPS, charter schools, and private schools. Many of the parents don't even consider private schools as an option due to the cost. That leaves charter schools as their choice over schools in KCPS for the many reasons that were previously stated. As charter school numbers continue to grow at a steady pace, more

parents are becoming interested in these independent school districts as alternatives for their children's education. Based on enrollment data from DESE, charter school enrollment in Missouri increased from 10,182 in 2014 to 10,754 in during the 2015-16 school year. Although parents have little knowledge about charter schools, they consistently enroll and re-enroll their children in these choice schools regardless of the academic record of the school based on state assessment data. The interest parents have in charter schools still seems to be based on their separation from KCPS.

### **How do Parents Gather Information?**

Research has found that some parents may rely exclusively on public reporting systems, whereas others may use their personal networks to gather opinions and inside information on schools, and some may even visit and observe in schools before making a choice (Hamilton & Guinn, 2005). The parents in this sample used various means to gather information in order to exercise choice. They obtained information from friends and family, gathered information from the internet and other media sources, and visited schools, both traditional and charter.

**Family, Friends, and Neighbors.** Indeed, social networks, including extended family and friends, are primary source of information about schools for many parents (Beales & Wahl, 1995). In this case, the majority of the parents obtained information about Banneker from someone they knew personally. Ms. Reed explained that she became interested in enrolling her child in Banneker because her mom has worked there for years, therefore she became very familiar with the school's culture, the staff, and administrators at the school. Although this choice was convenient for her because her mom worked at the school, she also felt very confident in the environment of the school. She reflected:

I've never been on the school's website it is always word of mouth for me. I talk to a lot of parents. I know a lot of people that I graduated with, and they have kids up here, and they enrolled their kids based on what their family said about this school. You just feel more comfortable going with word of mouth. When you know someone whose kids are already up here versus you trying to research. You could see one thing, but when someone is actually going through it is more helpful than what you are researching.

Ms. Stork simply took the word of a friend who was enrolling her child into Banneker. She reflects:

Well, my friend told me about Banneker because our kids went to Bryant (KCPS school) together, but then Bryant closed down. I was really just looking for a school outside of the district, and she was like, "I'm going to try Benjamin Banneker, it's an all year round school. It's a charter school, and it seems like a good school". I was like, "Well then since they're friends we should just let them go to school together". I found that many parents prefer to take recommendations from other parents when they are looking for a school. This information was more important than the information on school report cards or websites.

**Media Sources and Internet.** The perceptions that parents form about schools are also influenced by school websites, and school reviews. A few parents did go to the school's website or Google to find out information about the school. The internet search for information seemed to be a part of their research, but the information that was found was not used as a determining factor for the parents. It was more for information seeking or fact finding for personal reassurance that the school can be found on Google or that it has a website that is kept up to date. Ms. Riley said that she uses Google to find out information about the school. "I always look for the rating of the school. Sometimes you may see a charter school and the rating may not be so high, but you have to have a place for your child, but at least you have something to compare it to". Ms. Moore also said she also uses Google to find out information about Banneker, "I 'Google' you guys a lot. I'm going to your website just to get an overview and see what's going on. I just want to know what information is out there."

**School Visits.** The majority of the parents visited Banneker before making their final enrollment decision. I found that this group of parents do not go to visit a lot of different schools, but they did visit a few of the charter schools just to make a comparison of schools. Ms. Stanley had this to say:

I seek out information about schools through the internet, asking other parents, and I just go to visit the school. I like for someone at the school to give me a quick tour. Yeah, I like hands on all the way; I need to see. I want to put a face with a name by seeing people and talking with them to really get a better insight. I can tell when I step foot into an environment if it's the right place for me or my child.

**Investigation of Neighborhood Schools.** Only four parents actually toured other public and charter schools beside Banneker while trying to decide on a school. They were dissatisfied for various reasons, but the primary reason was the actual environment and climate of the school. Ms. Trevor is a parent whose children attended the traditional district schools before enrolling in Banneker. She explains the process that she went through before deciding on charter school enrollment and her dissatisfaction with the KCPS schools.

Well, for one, I went to several district schools and I did not like just when you walk in the door. It wasn't the appearance of the school; it was the discord and the chaos that was going on in the school. It was too much. You had teachers that didn't know where their students were. I mean, as a parent you coming here to take a look around the school and you have kids cussing in the hallway, you got the teacher cussing back at the kids. You have so many different things. So I decided this is not where my kid needs to be.

Ms. Bentley explained it this way:

I wanted them out of the traditional public school to give them an opportunity to try something different. Right now KCPS doesn't seem to be getting any better. The scores are not improving fast enough for me and I kind of wanted my kids to have an opportunity to advance. So that's why I chose a charter school.

The school visits can be a deal breaker. The parents want to know who works in the school. Who is the Principal? They want to know who goes to school there, and what is the environment like? Parents seek information from various sources, but the most beneficial



information that parents use to make school choice decisions are determined by school visits and word of mouth testimony from other parents.

### **What Reasons Did Parents Give for Choosing Benjamin Banneker?**

Parents were asked what specific qualities or programs most attracted them to enroll their children into Banneker. As most of the parents repeatedly stated, they've chosen what they believe to be the best school for their child. Various reasons relating to the academic qualities and social characteristics of the school were given. Some of the academic qualities that were listed were: science, technology, & math programs will prepare the students for college, small learning environments allow for more individualized instruction, and the extended year calendar allows for more time in the classroom with less time off in the summer. The top social characteristics that were listed are: Teachers care about the kids and the school has a family environment. Overall, the top answers were the positive perceptions parents had of Banneker, the year-round calendar, the school's technology theme, a safe and welcoming- environment, a smaller learning environment, Primarily parents were extremely satisfied with the relationship that they had with the teachers, administrators, and other staff members. This familiarity and comfort gave the parents a sense of assurance that their children were enrolled in the right school.

**Positive Perceptions of Benjamin Banneker.** Twenty parents were interviewed in order to investigate the perceptions of parents that led them to choose Banneker as an alternative to the KCPS schools. The parents that were interviewed had very positive perceptions of Banneker. These parents discussed a variety of characteristics that led to their decisions, i.e., the focus on the use of technology, friendly staff, smaller classes, and more personalized education. Parental

positive perceptions were formed by reports from family, friends, and neighbors who had children attending Banneker. So many of the parents enrolled their children based on the word of another parent. Ms. Stanley, explained it this way:

Well, I had a niece who actually went here. She went here all the way to the end of middle school and she was linked with a lot of programs as far as college goes and she was an outstanding student, so I thought it would be good for my daughter.

**Year-Round School Calendar.** Twelve of the twenty parents in this sample cited the year-round calendar as one of the primary reasons they chose Banneker for their child. The school design incorporates an extended school year consisting of 210 days. This is well beyond the state required 175 days for a traditional school year. The school also offers before and after school enrichment opportunities for its students. Banneker is one of only two charter schools in Kansas City that are considered year-round. Some of the parents that spoke about the year-round calendar mentioned the academic benefits, while others stated that it was convenient for the parents who would not have to pay for summer programs for their children to attend. Ms. Moore, whose 4<sup>th</sup> grade child enrolled when she was in pre-k had this to say, “I felt like my child would get a better education at a charter school, specifically this one, as an alternative to a traditional school for a couple of different reasons. I chose this school because it was year-round, had smaller class sizes, and that she would get more individual attention”. This parent believed that more school days would benefit her child academically. Mr. Poole explained why he believes in the extended year calendar:

One really important reason we considered enrolling our child in this school, and probably not for reasons that people thinks. That it is a year-round school. I believe if parents are reinforcing with what the kids have learned during the school year, then during summer break they lose it. You have to start back at square one. The year-round school helps out a lot.

They have a three week vacation, and they're right back at it. That's not enough, when you look at other countries and how they're raising their kids they are compared to ours and they go to school year round. Why can't we do it? So that really matters to me.

Ms. Bentley stated that she chose Banneker because it was a year-round school. She explains how it gives the kids an opportunity to retain more information. "They get out for about a month or so, but that doesn't leave the kids much time to forget their lesson. When I was coming up we had the whole summer out. I can tell you how I forgot a lot of stuff during the summer. I just appreciate that non-traditional schedule".

**Value of Technology Theme.** Technology has become an integral part of all aspects of teacher and learning in many schools. As outlined in the charter application, technology was to be integrated into classroom activities as part of the daily learning environment at Banneker. The charter also proposed a comprehensive technology plan to be developed by the school to ensure effective and efficient repair and replacement of technology based on a five-year cycle (Sluder, Snyder, & Thomas, 2001). Most parents believed that the school's thematic focus of technology is a significant segment of their education and preparation for high school and beyond. They further believed that having early exposure to technology will give their student an advantage that they may not otherwise have in society. Ms. Nelson, a parent of four children enrolled in the school admitted that she did not know much about the school before enrolling her son as a first grader, who is now twelve years old. She stated, "I enrolled him here because I heard that they offered technology here. I saw that they had the computers for the kids to use because we did not have a computer at home." Mrs. Barkley explained how she was most attracted to the technology theme of the school also.

The technology really caught my eye! I think that is really important because that's where society is headed. I wanted to wait to see if I wanted to choose this school, but as soon as I saw the technology, I was like, "Oh yes!" I wanted him to know different things that neither me, nor his dad, or the generation before us knew. Where he can withstand and make a good living for himself and do good in college.

This is in line with the findings of a study by the Center on Reinventing Public Education (2007) at the University of Washington, which found that low to moderate income parents searched for a particular school that emphasized the basics, math, science, and technology. The comment by Mrs. Barkley and Ms. Nelson aligned with previous studies that indicated that parents choose schools as a way of guiding their children toward long-term school and career goals (Flynn, 1995; Fuller et al., 1996).

**Safe and Pleasant Learning Environment.** Twelve of the twenty parents mentioned that they have maintained their enrollment at Benjamin Banneker because they are confident that it is a safe and positive learning environment for their children. They also feel that their child is growing socially and academically because of the culture at the school. This perception is in line with research findings of Friedman, Bobrowski, and Geraci (2006) that safety is one of the most important components in the child's educational environment sought by parents. With all of the recent news about school shootings and bullying in the news, parents are almost afraid to send their children to any school. It is, of course, widely acknowledged that parents may take into consideration a number of criteria when forming their preferences for schools, including school safety, student body composition, race, and academic quality (Vanderhoff, 2008; Goldhaber, 1999, Saporito & Lareau, 1999). Ms. Golden explained that one of the main characteristics that she looks for in a school is teachers who are responsible and mature enough to handle what's going on in their own lives, but still take care of her son. "I want him to be and feel protected at all times." Parents value safety. Mr. Poole, the parent of a fourth grader reflected:

Well for me, I would say overall just safety. Not just the physical safety, but for the kids to feel safe and secure when they come into school each day. When they come here, I feel like they are in good hands with Administration and the Teachers. One of the biggest things for me is that none of my kids have ever come home to say that they have been bullied. Bullying in my eyes can be nipped in the bud. The teachers and administration are always on it. It takes everybody's eyes to be able to see any situation is occurring constantly. They have never come home and said, "Well, such and such, are picking on me."

Parents who have their children enrolled in Banneker believe the school provides a safe and secure environment with the guidance of caring adults. Ms. Wright, the parent of a second, third, and seventh grade student emphatically stated:

Well people know that I have one or two challenging children, and I mean especially with Tyrion because Naveah didn't really have many problems this year. Tyrion, at his last school, they didn't even try to deal with him. They just suspended him. You know, I think since he's been here he's been suspended maybe one time. I think that you all try to work with him instead of just sending him home. See at the old school, they just didn't want to deal with them so they just send them home. I had a bad taste in my mouth about a situation that happened last year. There was this teacher that put his hands on my son, but I couldn't prove it. My son said he did, but then some of the teachers got involved in it and it was all confusing. I didn't like that. I didn't like how the Principal handled it. That's what made me feel like I wanted my kids out of that school. That's why I want my kids to stay here because I know you all care about the kids.

These perceptions are consistent with research of Capps and Maxwell (1999) who reported that a higher degree of interpersonal relationships and interaction was present among students, teachers, and other staff members in smaller schools. Based on information received from these parents, it is evident that some parents may not choose schools based solely on academic strength. Other factors related to safety, location, and discipline are also important values perceived by parents.

**Smaller Learning Environment.** It is, of course, widely acknowledged that parents may take into consideration a number of criteria when forming their preferences for schools, including safety, student body composition, race, and academic quality, (Vanderhoff, 2008;

Goldhaber, 1999, Saporito & Lareau, 1999). Thirteen of the twenty parents that were interviewed were very impressed with the smaller class sizes. Banneker currently has an average of about 20:1 student-teacher ratio; compared to 24:1 student-teacher ratio in KCPS schools. Parents particularly liked the idea of smaller classrooms for several reasons, but the primary reason was that they believed their child would get more one-on-one attention from the teacher. Mrs. Moore stated, “One thing that I really like about this school is the smaller classrooms with having less children so that teachers or the aide can be a little bit more responsive or hands on with your child”. Mrs. Riley, a parent who had home-schooled her child wanted more “personalized” education for her daughter. Ms. Riley shared:

This charter school has always had more of a focus and a handle more of a family feel. Basically, Kansas City Missouri School district, it was kind of over-crowded, there was a lot going on. When the charter schools first started Bentley Banneker had personalized classrooms; the kids were getting their needs met. They were excited because it was the new thing. It was a no brainer for me to know where my child would go.

This parent believed that her daughter’s individual needs were being met as a student at Banneker. She defined personalized learning in relation to students having more one-on- one time with the teacher because it was less students in the classroom. She perceived that her child was getting instruction individualized for her at the level she needed it at all times. Banneker’s classes were smaller and the school had an environment that was warm and welcoming. These perceptions are consistent with the research of Capps and Maxwell (1999), who reported that a higher degree of interpersonal relationships and interactions was present among students, teachers, and other staff members in smaller schools. Similarly, in a study by Lee and Loeb (2000), parents preferred smaller schools (fewer than 400 students) where teachers exhibited higher levels of interest, a positive attitude, and a deeper sense of responsibility for the learning

of their students. Many parents complained of the class size in KCPS schools as being too crowded. Ms. Grant reflected:

Most public schools have too many kids in the schools and classrooms, and they are closing all of the schools. So the kids have to be put in one school. The classrooms are too big, and all of the kids are in one class. So they really aren't learning anything because you have the ones that talk, and the ones that don't want to do nothing. It's just too big.

In summary, parents consistently reflected that they chose this charter school for its safe and secure learning environment; smaller class sizes; year-round calendar; and the technology theme.

### **How Do Parents Weigh the School's Test Data in the Decision Making Process?**

Each year schools both traditional and charter schools are mandated to report to parents how the students in the school performed on the state assessment no later than by the beginning of the school year. State tests are administered during the spring, with scores being available in early August. In addition to the school's publication of school test data, it is also published annually on the state's department of education website (DESE), and in the local newspaper. NCLB also required states and school districts to give parents easy-to-read, detailed report cards on schools and districts, telling parents which schools are succeeding. Included in the report cards are students' achievement data broken out by race, ethnicity, gender, English language proficiency, migrant status, disability status and low-income status; as well as important information about the professional qualifications of teachers. With these provisions, NCLB ensured that parents have important, timely information about the schools their children attend – whether they are performing well or not for all children, regardless of their background.

**Access to School Test Data.** Each year during the school's orientation to the beginning of the school year, Administrators at Banneker go over the school's MAP test scores from the prior year. Parents are given specific information about the percentage of students who scored

below basic, basic, proficient, or advanced on the Math, English Language Arts, and Science. They are also shown how Banneker compares to the other charter schools and the KCP schools (See Appendix C). Also, copies of each student's test scores are mailed to the address listed on their enrollment applications. Parents are given ample information pertaining to the academic progress of the school. Does this information, whether considered positive or negative really matter to parents as they decide on the right school for their child?

I found that parents want to know whether students in the school are getting a good education, but they do not base this judgment on the school district's test data or state test data. Therefore, the parents in this study do not make enrollment decisions based on the academic data that is made public to the school and community. Only one parent in this sample reported that she gathered academic information i.e. test scores, reading scores, math scores. Each year the schools' state test scores are published in the local newspapers for everyone to see. Schools are also required to publish letters notifying parents of their school improvement status which is based on the state test scores. This academic data is also available on the Missouri Department of Elementary & Secondary Education (DESE) website. Ms. Bentley, a parent with three children enrolled in Banneker, was one of twenty parents who stated she sought out Banneker's state test scores and district test information while deciding on a school for her children. Ms. Bentley stated:

I wanted to know what type of testing they're doing in reading and math, and at the same time what else are you testing in and what the test used for. Because this is a charter school, I knew they would have their own curriculum, and I chose this school because of the curriculum. Even though the state test scores were low, I felt like my kids would still learn a lot. My friend has a daughter here and I've been impressed with her growth as a student since she enrolled in Banneker.



Here is a parent who took time to seek out test data, but still did not use this information to make an enrollment decision. Based on her response she just wanted to know for the sake of knowing. The decision to enroll her children at Banneker was based on her perceived success of her friend's child. Because her friend's daughter was making good grades and seemed to be growing academically, Ms. Bentley was convinced that her own children could have the same success at Banneker.

**Parents' Reactions to School Test Data.** Test scores are important to parents, but it may not be the first thing that they want to know when they are seeking out the best school for their child. During a second interview with parents, I actually took the time to show them the test data and explained it to them. Based on their facial expressions and body language, they seemed to have a very different reaction to the test scores. All of the parents seemed very surprised that Banneker was so low on the list of schools in the city (Appendix C). Although, test data is available to parents, some of them stated they were aware of the scores, while others were not.

I found that when parents are given adequate information about test scores it could have an impact on their decision to enroll their child in a school whose test scores are low. I asked the question, "If I showed you a list of charter schools in the city based on test scores, which identifies Banneker as the third from the bottom, would that affect your decision to re-enroll your children here? Ms. Nelson had this reaction, when she saw the test scores:

Yes, if I wasn't already here it would definitely affect my decision to enroll. I would look at other schools before coming here. Now that I am here it doesn't so much. I can see the learning pattern of my children. I can see that they are learning based on the work that we do together at home. But it is still that "but" factor year after year if you don't see growth there then that is a factor. No matter what relationships you have with the people who's there you're not going to have that relationship when they have to move on to high school. They have to travel on and so if the test scores don't progress, then I will be looking for another school.

Ms. Trevor stated that test scores indicate how well the teachers and students in the school are doing.

Test scores are more important to me the older my children get. I did not place my children in the Kansas City public schools because of the low test scores. In the beginning when I placed my children here I did not know how well the school was doing on the test. I just chose this school because my friend said that it was a good school. Now, I would look at other schools first. I would look to the schools higher on the list for enrollment first. There would be no doubt in my mind if I could get into those schools instead of this one I would. But since I'm here, I like it here. I trust the people who are responsible for my kid.

**Understanding Parental Perceptions of Academic Data.** Several urban public school districts are currently experimenting with public school choice plans, and the federal NCLB of 2001 includes a choice provision allowing students in failing schools to choose to attend non-failing schools outside of their neighborhood. The goal of these choice plans is to increase academic outcomes for disadvantaged students by allowing them to attend higher-performing schools and by creating pressure on failing schools to improve through the threat of losing students, implicitly assuming that parents select schools for academics when offered the opportunity to do so. However, recent work on parental choice has found that low-income families place much less weight on academics when choosing schools, decreasing the immediate academic gains for those exercising choice (Hastings & Weinstein, 2008), as well as the pressure for low-performing schools to improve academic achievement. In addition, Schneider and Buckley (2002) monitored the search behavior of parents on an internet web site for public schools in Washington D.C. and show that academics are more important search criteria to college-educated parents. All of this recent research has been found consistent with the group of parents that I interviewed for this study.

As a part of my research, I wanted to have a clear understanding as to how much parents take the school's test scores into consideration when making enrollment or re-enrollment

decisions. During the parent interviews, parents were asked about the type of information they collect when making a decision about enrollment. Parents were confronted with graphs that reveal the school's test data (Appendix C), as well as how the school stands in comparison to other charter schools and the KCPS district (Appendix D). I found more often than not parents do not use the school's test data to make enrollment decisions. Overall, I found that parents do not believe that test data is the most important information necessary when it comes to making enrollment decisions. Test data is just one way a school is judged, but certainly not the most meaningful information about the school for most of the parents. Ms. Stanley explained it this way:

I feel like academics are important, but after working in a school, I have learned that there are many very intelligent students in schools who just don't do well on tests. They make good grades but don't do well on tests. My daughter is that way. Test scores do not give a good picture of the actual academic ability of some students. When students who have test anxiety fail to do well on those, then the school tends to suffer. Grades and test scores do not match the actual ability of the kids in the school. State test scores may improve for schools if more students did well. Test scores may not be an accurate representation of what students are learning.

Mrs. Barkley spoke specifically about how the technology theme attracted her to the school in her first interview. When I interviewed her a second time and asked her how important are the school's test scores to her in her decision-making processes. She stated that she believes that test scores better validate the ability of individual students. "Colleges recognize test scores, and if students are going to get into college they have to have good test scores".

Based on their responses, neither Ms. Stanley, nor Mrs. Barkley take into account the school's test scores are most important when making an enrollment decision. Ms. Stanley believes that student's individual test scores may not always reflect their actual ability. She has witnessed her own child struggle with test anxiety, and may not do as well on standardized test.

However, her daughter is at the top of her class and excels in all subjects as assessed by her teacher. Mrs. Barkley, also expressed that individual test data and academic growth as assessed by standardized tests will yield higher benefit for the student in the end. Her comments essentially, speak directly to her view on inability of the school's overall test data to reflect the growth of all students as individuals.

Initially, the majority of the parents stated that test scores were not important to them as a decision-making factor for enrollment into Banneker. I decided to do a follow-up interview to gather more in-depth information about their knowledge of test scores and how this information affects their decision. I also inquired a second time of whether parents seek out test score data when searching for schools. The parents answered the same way during the second interview. Parents generally do not seek out information about test score data when making enrollment and/or re-enrollment decisions. I found that they simply base their decision of their own satisfaction with the school regardless of the state test scores. Mrs. Barkley did have this statement to add,

Parents with a plan for their children are very interested in the school's test scores, but most parents in the inner city are looking for schools that are safe for their kids. They are most interested in their ability to trust the school with their child. It's about really survival skills.

This statement from Mrs. Barkley tends to reflect her view on how inner city parents choose schools, meaning that parents would prioritize safety over high test scores. Again, this statement indicates school safety or the parent's perception of the school's safe environment is of higher importance than the school's academic data. This is aligned with research by Williams and Ferguson (1999), who reported that safety is one of the most important components in a child's educational learning environment and can impact the overall academic outcome. It is, of course,

widely acknowledged that parents may take into consideration a number of criteria when forming their preferences for schools, including school safety, student body composition, race, and academic quality (Vanderhoff, 2008; Goldhaber, 1999; Saporito & Lareau, 1999).

Based on the interview data from this group of parents, I've found that when parents were confronted with academic data that proves the scores are lower than KCPS it did not make any difference in their decision to maintain their enrollment in Banneker. Parents seem to weigh safety, discipline, and their relationship with staff members as more important than the school's test scores. Parents are more interested in the academic advancement of their individual child as measured by grades and district tests. They do not perceive that there is any connection between how well or poorly their children are advancing based on the school's state test scores. They seem to justify this by stating that state tests are only given once a year, and do not wholly demonstrate what their child or children accomplish all year in the classroom. Simply stated parents do not use state test data to assess the success or failure of the school because it is not indicative of the school's success. From the parents' perspective, if their child is successfully progressing, then the school is a success. The school is doing what they want, which is educating their child. Ms. Nelson, a parent with four children enrolled in Banneker had this to say:

Here at Banneker I feel like it challenges the children more here and they're on the higher learning level. Compared to the Kansas City School District it was not challenging enough so this is why I continue to come here. One reason, I pulled my son out in a kindergarten is because he wasn't being challenged. He knew everything; he was so advanced, they would send him boxes of books home because he liked to read so much. I was like okay, I need to send him somewhere else where I feel like he's going to advance. And that's why we are here. He's increased on his math so much. He can sit there and count change back before the cashier can enter it into the computer. He can see the price and he'll do it in his head that fast. Yes, he's grown so much since he has been here. I'm proud to say that all of them are so advanced. Their teachers say compared to other students they are so far ahead even with my kindergarten with behavior issues he's still at the top of his class. So it's like they are learning so much I wouldn't want to pulled them

out and interrupt their learning. We have all become accustom and they're comfortable with the staff, with the principal, the superintendent.

### **The School Staff's View on Parental Perceptions of Banneker**

Of the 30 staff members, four staff members were interviewed. It was necessary to explore information that they gathered from the parent's perceptions about the school as well as to understand the staff contribution to the school's climate, how it relates to the perceptions of the parents, and ultimately how it affects parental decision making of Banneker. These staff interviews lasted from 30 – 60 minutes and were conducted face-to-face. The staff members have on-going contact with parents in their particular role in the school, and are able to verify some of the parent's reasons for choosing Banneker.

**Staff Member #1.** Mrs. Santo has been employed for Banneker for seven years. She describes her role as a go-between the parents and the administration of the school to ensure academic success and healthy social development of all students. She works with parents to ensure that they are informed about all aspects of the school. Mrs. Santo is also responsible for leading the monthly Parent Advisory Committee (PAC) meetings where parents are invited to discuss school-related questions and concerns with teachers and administrators. I knew I could get valuable information from Mrs. Santo because of her constant interaction with the parents. Parents often have an opportunity to discuss likes and dislikes about Banneker with her. In addition, parents often explain to Mrs. Santo their reasons for leaving other schools and particular interest they are seeking in a school. She receives first hand information from parents as to why they chose Banneker over other charter schools, and how they perceive Banneker in comparison to other schools.

**Staff Member #2.** Mrs. Jordan has been employed by Banneker for ten years. For the purposes of this study, I felt like Mrs. Jordan's role could inform the study because she frequently interacts with parents about the academic and behavioral needs of students. She works with students to build positive relationships with students. She also works specifically with parents and students who are at-risk of failure due to poor academics, behavioral challenges, or attendance.

**Staff Member #3.** Mrs. Artex has been employed by Banneker for over twelve years. In her role as a staff member, Mrs. Artex has the unique experience of conversing with parents about their child's behavior. She also has an opportunity to discuss with parents, how the student may interact with his/her teacher and peers. Mrs. Artex also chose Banneker as the school of choice for her youngest son, who is now a freshman in college. She addresses some of her views about the school from a parental perspective as well.

**Staff Member #4.** Ms. Dyson is employed as the school's Chief Data Officer, and has been for over twelve years. In her role she works to collect, disseminate and work with all data related to student learning. Ms. Dyson is personally responsible for presenting test data to parents on an annual basis. She can address the issue of whether parents even inquire about school test data, and how that impacts their enrollment decision. Additionally, Ms. Dyson acts as a school administrator who handles discipline concerns and conflicts between students. She frequently meets with teachers and parents to discuss resources available for student's academic and social development.

### **Staff Perceptions of Reasons Parents Chose Banneker**

**Technology Theme.** Banneker's urban-focused school is committed to high academic outcomes with the infusion of technology for each student. The infusion of technology is critical and central to the learning of all students at Banneker. All four of these staff members that were interviewed believe parental choice of Banneker is due to the school's technology theme. As stated earlier, many parents want their child to attend a school that focuses on the use and acquisition of technological skills as preparation for high school, college, and future career goals. All four staff members stated specifically that parents chose Banneker because of the technology. Ms. Dyson stated:

The way we run our advertisement as a robotics/technology thrust. We have a strong relationship with the Black Family Technology Awareness Association (BFTAA). That seemed to attract parents and students who wanted to do the robotics theme so that technology name tends make parents want to enroll their children here.

Mrs. Artex also perceived that parents chose Banneker due to the technology theme. She explained:

Parents chose this school in particular for several reasons, one being the technology theme. Moreover, technology is the school or the backbone of what society is building itself on. Technology is constantly changing and growing. It also changes the way kids can learn. It is absolutely what students need to learn for the future.

Statements from Mrs. Santo were consistent with views of the members of the administrators.

She has reports from parents who were drawn to the school because of the technology theme and the robotics program. She stated:

A lot of parents have reported that they were drawn here because of the technology basis in the name of the school and the emphasis that the school gives on technology. Also, I know some parents are really enthralled with the robotics programs that we have here. They know and see this world is going in the direction of technology and many parents believe this is a good start for their children. Many parents of the 8th graders who have gone on to high school, who also have younger children still enrolled here have stated how important it was for their children to have gotten that basis in technology here at



Banneker. They have a foundation in how to use technology to enhance their learning. So I think in terms of programs the robotics and technology have really drawn parents here.

As stated earlier, many of the parents mentioned the significance of the school's focus on technology in their decision to enroll and re-enroll their children in Banneker. The Center on Reinventing Public Education at the University of Washington's study (2007) found that low-to-moderate income parents searched for a particular school that emphasized the basics of math, science, and technology.

**Relationships with Staff.** All four of the staff members that were interviewed reported that parents value the relationships that they have built with staff members at Banneker. The consensus is that parents often maintain enrollment if they at least one positive relationship with a caring and nurturing person who they believe has their child's best interest at heart. Mrs. Jordan said:

When I started working here the thing that impressed me because I had never worked in an educational setting before, but what struck me was the relationships. The longer I was here the more I developed those same relationships with the kids and the parents. Because some of the kids have been here since they were 4,5,or 6 years old, you get the opportunity to get to know them and get to know their family. Since I worked here and I thought it was a good place for other people's kids, then it would be good for mine. I brought all of my kids here and they were surrounded with love, support, and guidance.

Mrs. Santo said:

One reason parents have stated that they come to Banneker is that they have experienced an open door policy from the Superintendent, and they know that the staff here are supportive of the students behaviorally and academically. I have also heard parents who are really impressed with the school counselor, special needs teachers, and the speech therapist. Parents know that Banneker have a lot of things that parents expect from a school, in terms of supporting their children. I know this because I when I meet with parents I hear them brag about their child's needs being met.

Mrs. Artex's comments are consistent with the other staff members. She said:

I would say about 85% of parents are satisfied with the relationships they've built with staff members in the school. We do offer an open door policy for parents to voice their concerns. It's the Superintendent's policy to have an open door policy. From the Dean of Students and the Counselor to the teachers, everyone is available. Maybe not at the drop of a dime, but if you're willing to wait they are here to help you. Also if you come in with an open mind that we have to get to the bottom of it together. I do believe parents appreciate that open door policy; when they call we try to handle it.

The staff members have consistently reported that parents speak of the valuable relationships that they have with the school staff, whether it is a teacher or an administrator causes the parent to be more satisfied with the school. Research studies have proven that parents are more satisfied with the schools that they chosen (Buckley & Schneider, 2003). Many parents are choosing this school because they feel that the teachers, support staff, and school administrators genuinely care about their children. This is in agreement with Ogden and Germinario (1995), who suggest that "no one person in a school is solely responsible for the success or failure of a student" (p. 113).

### **How Do Parents Gather Information about Schools?**

Some parents may rely exclusively on public reporting systems, whereas others may use their personal networks to gather opinions and inside information on schools, and some may even visit and observe in schools before making a choice (Hamilton & Guinn, 2005). The staff members that were interviewed reported that parental decision-making is primarily based on word of mouth. The parents in the study find the information they receive from friends, family, and fellow parents to be most important to them as they search for the best school for their child. Mrs. Jordan said, mostly word of mouth; I know as a parent for my oldest son it was more word of mouth and talking to parents because I was trying to get a feel for where I could place him."

Ms. Dyson said,

Parents are saying they chose us because they knew somebody whose child goes here or a person who works here. We're also a strong family school. It seems like we are feast or

famine. Parents are choosing schools based on experiences within the school. So, either they are completely in love with Banneker, and that's the feast, or a bad situation has happened and it's famine. If they love us they will tell their cousins, sisters, brothers, and next door neighbors about us. They will shout us to the roof top, and we will get lots and lots of kids based on the fact that someone's cousin or relative went here.

Mrs. Artex stated:

When I ask most of the parents that are coming to Banneker how they find out about Banneker, I've found that it's mostly through word of mouth. When parents are satisfied, just like if you are satisfied, you're going to talk about it and you are going to tell others, "come to my child's school" I'm not saying it because I know what they said, but that's what they tell me. I wouldn't recommend anything if I wasn't satisfied with it myself.

When I asked Mrs. Santo about the ways in which parents find out about Banneker and the information that they deem important to make an informed decision, she had this to say:

A lot of them it is word of mouth. We have several families here, one may have a sister's child here and an aunt, so a lot of word of mouth. When it gets out that this is a good school to place your children. Now that's one way. Some of them have been on the internet to find out information. There was one parent, in particular who found us on the internet and came for a tour. When she came here she liked the racial make-up of the school. Her child was attending a suburban school where he was the minority.

**What Information Do Parents Seek?** What do parents want to know most about a school before enrolling their child in that school? When parents are asking other parents and researching the internet for information about schools they are seeking a myriad of things. A study commissioned by *Education Week* explored the information needs of parents through focus groups. According to the article, parents expressed the desire for school-level reports that provide a mix of quantitative and qualitative information, particularly on topics related to school safety, teacher qualifications, and academic achievement. The same qualities that parents value in schools would be synonymous with the type of information they are seeking while trying to make an enrollment decision. The staff members found that parents are asking about various topics pertaining to teacher quality, friendliness of the staff, safety, discipline, test scores,

curriculum, and programs offered by the school. Mrs. Artex, spoke very passionately about a phone conversation with a parent about the school. She reflected:

So I had a parent call today and ask what's special about our school. We talked about our labs and computers along with the technology. She was very excited to come for a tour. She was really impressed, and I thought that was good. Parents are calling and asking questions like.... Is there a fee to attend? Do we have pre-K? A lot of parents don't know what to ask until they get the child here; then they get a feel for the school.

When I asked Mrs. Santo to explain what information parents have been most interesting in having in order to make a decision, she stated the following:

Safety is the number one thing parents want to know about the school. If the school is not safe and/or the child does not feel safe there is no way that child is going to blossom in the environment. So I think safety of the environment. Parents want to know if the teachers care about their child. They also want to know if there are programs like before/after school care or tutoring.

Research by Williams and Ferguson (1999) reported that safety is one of the most important components in a child's educational learning environment and can impact the overall academic outcome. Ms. Dyson said,

I think that if parents hear that a school has made provisional accreditation and those kind of things that that is the best school choice for them. What parents need to hear is a couple of buzz words like, "every child", "this is the plan for your child", "open door policy", "this is our curriculum". Parents of poor children don't know how to talk curriculum, standards, and outcomes. Parents that are most concerned with academics may ask about curriculum. On the other hand, a parent that is concerned about the safety of her child may ask about discipline, bullying, and/or classroom size.

The school staff's knowledge of the type of information that parents are seeking while making a school choice decision is consistent with research. Howell's (2006) assessment of the criteria parents used to select schools in underperforming districts was found to be consistent with previous survey research. The most important qualities of a school to parents were quality of

teaching, discipline, safety and order, and classes offered. Location, racial-ethnic composition, and the prevalence of friends were the least important (p.168).

**How Important is Academic Data to Parents?** I spoke specifically to Banneker school staff about the relationship between school choice and academic data in an effort to triangulate the data concerning test score information. So a follow-up interview consisted of questions that would draw from the experiences of staff members surrounding academic data. The majority of the parents that I interviewed stated that they did not know Banneker test scores were so low, but they would keep their children enrolled in the school regardless of the test scores. The staff seemed to agree with the findings mentioned earlier in the chapter, in that many parents are not concerned with test data. Parents simply want to know how their child as an individual is doing.

Mrs. Santo stated:

As long as their child passes to the next grade or has a grade higher than a “D”, then they are satisfied. There are so many variables that go along with that. To the parents that we are dealing with to them a “C” average may be great because they realize that their child is under a lot of pressure from day to day. They may not be able to go outside and just have to live around a lot of violence. So to them a “C” is their academic achievement and it’s good, or even excellent.

Ms. Dyson stated:

Overall, I have not found that parents are interested in our MAP scores. They say they aren’t interested based on their acceptance of the data. I do my best to explain what each level means and where Banneker is in relation to other schools, but parents never ask questions about it. They also keep coming back year after year. I know that there are many parents who are interested in their child’s individual scores; however, I think most parents assume Banneker’s scores are pretty good or at least decent. Most of our parents like the fact that our school has a family feel, and they believe administration and teachers will look after their child than the actual scores of our school. It is not until that trust is breached that parents may begin to question the quality of our instruction or school.

## Summary

In summary, the staff members and parent perceptions were consistent. All of the staff members stated that parents base their enrollment decision making on the information obtained from other parents. The school staff also found that the primary reasons for parental choice of Banneker was because of the technology theme and the positive perceptions parents have about Banneker. The parents perceive their student's individual needs are being met by caring and nurturing staff members; the school is safe; and the environment is very welcoming. Lastly, parents are more concerned with the individual achievement of their child versus the overall scores of the school. Parents are concerned about daily grades, pre and post test scores, district assessments, and homework skills. They seem to use these as measurements as an indication of what their child is learning and how well they may or may not be performing on a day to day basis.

## **Chapter 5**

### **Conclusions and Implications**

The question of why and/or how parents choose a particular school is not a simple one to answer. This study investigated the perceptions that led parents to choose a charter school as an alternative to the TPS in Kansas City. The study found several specific characteristics that attracted parents to choose Benjamin Banneker Charter Academy of Technology, (Banneker) as the school of choice for their children. Interviews with parents, classified staff, and administrators were conducted to compare perspectives on the characteristics parents sought from the public charter school of choice and the specifics of the decision making process. The following research questions guided this study: (a) How do parents gather information about schools? (b) What reasons did parents give for choosing Banneker? (c) How do parents weigh the school's test data versus their child's individual test data when making enrollment/re-enrollment decisions?

#### **Why are Parents Interested in Charter Schooling?**

**Charter Schools in the Marketplace of Schools in Kansas City.** Increased parental choice was proposed as an educational reform strategy that was proposed to improve student achievement, but evidence of its effectiveness as a reform strategy has been mixed. The rationale behind school choice was to bring the virtue of the free market into the public school system by increasing parental discretion over how and where their children are educated. Charter schools have been aimed at breaking the mold of the large urban school and promoted as a way to restructure urban public education from within (Fusarelli, 1999). Many charter schools have been established in urban areas.

Charter school laws in Missouri are limited to the St. Louis and Kansas City school districts. Arguments for school choice rests on the assumption that giving parents choice should ultimately change the schools themselves by making better “products” available to parents to choose from. Charter schools are often seen as a central tool to leverage such change as the improvement of public schools (Hill, Pierce, & Guthrie, 1997; Hoxby, 2000; Teske et al., 2000). Parents with children in underperforming public schools are more than twice as likely to name a preferred alternative public school in their district or a charter school than are parents with children in schools that made AYP ( Howell, 2006).

Finally, and probably most importantly, public schools are commonly perceived to be in such a bad state that people are looking to implement any program that might help to bring about improvements (Goldhaber, 1999). The purpose of this study is to understand why parents in Kansas City, Missouri choose charter schools and how they go about making the decision on one school over another.

As the review of literature has demonstrated and articulated, numerous studies have indicated many factors that can lead parents to seek out alternative public schools as their school of choice. The continuing growth of public charter schools remains a parental option to TPS. The defining characteristic of the school choice reform strategy is its treatment of families as consumers and the accountability of schools to their enrolled and/or potentially enrolled families. In this section, I delve into the parent as the consumer of school choice in Kansas City, including their views on Kansas City Public Schools (KCPS).

**Parents as Consumers.** Parents choosing schools for non-academic reasons could influence schools to become more interested in marketing schools based on these factors as opposed to academics. There are more than twenty charter schools in Kansas City with the



opportunity to educate more than 10,000 students that are enrolled in them (DESE, 2015). This would indicate that there is strong competition for the students within the boundaries of the KCPS district. Many of the charter schools yielded lower test scores as demonstrated on the annual state test (see Appendix C).

What I found by researching this topic is that the parents in this study are concerned about where their child attends schools, as every parent should be. This is very plainly stated throughout the interviews that I have conducted. These parents were so passionate about the need for their child to receive a better education than they did as a student in KC public schools. Parents weigh many school characteristics that lead them to exercise their alternative school choice options to find the best learning environment for their children ( Hoxby, 2000; Teske et al, 2000). Education is very important to parents. They equate education with freedom. It is seen as the vehicle to someday help their children escape the ills of poverty. Several of the parents stated, “I want my children to have a better education than I did.”

Parents profess to want their children in a school that will provide the best education to prepare them for college or a career. The literature on this topic and the research that I’ve done here confirms that parents use characteristics other than school test scores when choosing a school. Parents are concerned with ideas relating to things such as whether their child is safe, whether their child’s discipline concerns are minimized, and if they have a positive relationship with the teacher. Although I was rather surprised that parents choose these other factors over academic data/school test scores, this idea is consistent with research. According to research, parents search for schools that have safe and secure learning environments; caring and nurturing teachers; high test scores; emphases on science, math, and technology; small class sizes; college-bound programs; and available intervention and supports (Buchen, 2004; Coulson, 1999;

Murphy et al., 2001; Sergiovanni, 2001; West & Hind, 2007). There are parents who inquired about test scores, but the majority of the parents in this study did not. I'd have to admit, that it seemed rather peculiar to me that parents desire an adequate education for their children, but they do not use test scores to assess the school's ability to provide this type of education. We will discuss later in the chapter the views of parents on the importance of academic data in their search for a school.

### **What Does School Choice Mean to Parents in Kansas City?**

Parents are consumers in the marketplace of schools in Kansas City. This means that parents have to shop around by gathering information about schools in order to make the choice that is most consistent with their values and needs.

Every year parents across the city find themselves in a quandary searching for a high-quality school they believe will prepare their children for the future. Often this dilemma is a result of the many factors plaguing the current system of public education in our nation today. These current conditions and challenges of TPS compel parents to seek distinct characteristics in alternative schools (Rothman, 2004). With more than 20 charter schools in Kansas City, charter schools have become a leading force in the market for choice. These parents, as consumers in the market of school choice in Kansas City see charter schools as the prominent choice for them due to their negative perceptions of KCPS. Although these parents did not know all of the information regarding school reform strategies or the concept behind the birth of charter schools, they did, however express that the thought of their child having to attend a school in KCPS was riveting for them. School choice is important to parents because it gives them the opportunity to find a school that fits their kid's interest, skills and ability.

Banneker for some of the parents was not their first choice. A few of the parents in this study even shopped for enrollment in other charter schools, but a charter school over a traditional public school was their first choice. Other charter schools that they were interested in may have had more extracurricular activities, was in a more convenient location, or had other characteristics that were attractive to parents. Consequently, parents may have settled for Banneker after being denied enrollment or being placed on waiting list at other charter schools. However, these parents were still seeking enrollment in a charter school other than one in KCPS.

**The Notion of “Anything but KCPS”.** The whole concept surrounding school choice is to give parents options, but for the group of parents who participated in this research, the traditional public school system, KCPS, was not even an option for them. The parents in the study consistently stated that they wanted to enroll their children in any public school that was not connected to KCPS. The idea was that parents were seeking, in their words, “anything but” for their children to attend school in the KCPS district, based on their negative perceptions of the district. In prior research on this topic, parents viewed charter schools as a place where their children have a better chance of academic success and are prepared for high school and college. Reports show that mounting challenges in the public schools impact how parents perceive the ability of public schools to provide a quality education they seek for their children (Bracey, 2007; Causey-Bush, 2005; Center for Education Reform, 2003; Conley, 2007).

### **How Do Parents Gather Information About Schools?**

The majority of the parents stated that they will do everything to find the best school for their children. Prior studies have shown that parents will continue to search for the best school for their children – the one they believe will provide the best learning environment and also prepare their children for adult life (Hoxby, 2000; Teske et al., 2000). In general, most parents

take the school choice process very seriously and gather information from various sources to make their final choice. Parents in this study were greatly influenced to choose Banneker as their school of choice by other parents.

According to the information retrieved in this study, it appears the preferred source parents use to inform their school choice decision is from information provided by parents. These are parents who have students currently enrolled or have been enrolled in Banneker in the past. Parents who were interviewed learned about Banneker from other parents who believed their children were being successful. This success was based on grades, discipline, or peer relationships. For example, one parent stated that she enrolled her son in Banneker because her daughter had been bullied at a KCPS school in the past, and she was convinced by her friend that her child would be safe at Banneker. Many of the parents discussed how the children of their friends were progressing academically, and they attributed the progress to the quality instruction of the teaching.

Parents admitted to becoming interested in Banneker after parents referred them to Banneker. It was through first hand reports from other parents who believed their children were experiencing success. Overall, the data collected from the interviews indicated that most of the parents overwhelmingly sought Benjamin Banneker as their school of choice for various reasons. Parents also chose Banneker for the following reasons: positive perceptions of the teachers, staff, curriculum, and school culture, the technology theme as a means to prepare their child for the future, small school and class sizes and a smaller, perceived safe learning community, and very negative perceptions of the KCPS schools.

This is consistent with the findings by Teske et al. (2007) where they found the same context of how parents research their information and investigate other TPS. According to their study, 46% of the parents gather information by talking to people, 20 % report talking to people outside the family, and the rest from other various media sources (p.27). Parents also rely on information they gather from their families, friends, and acquaintances within their communities (Beales & Wahl, 1995; Heise, 1995; Rebenstein & Adelman, 1994). Few are also influenced by information gathered from other media sources, i.e. newspapers, school report cards, and online school reviews reporting test scores and other academic data (Buckley & Schneider, 2003; Chubb & Moe, 1990).

### **What Reasons Did Parents Give for Choosing Banneker?**

The parents in this study spoke very honestly about their negative perceptions of KCPS. Their decision in choosing Banneker was also influenced by their perceptions of the academics, accreditation, safety and discipline issues at the TPS where some of them attended as students or had first-hand experience in the past. These perceptions brought about by the perceived current challenges and issues of other public traditional schools in their communities such as gang violence, graduation rate, student achievement, career prospects and college access, compel parents to exercise their alternative options (Finn, 2006; Learning First Alliance, 2001).

One primary complaint the parents had about KCPS schools was the re-occurring problems with the low academic performance and accreditation status. Parents could not really explain what the lack of accreditation means, but they do know that it is important for schools to be accredited and it related to academic performance. Based on their conversation, parents perceive the lack of accreditation of the school district as a result of poor academic progress, and they feel it would hinder their student from getting a quality education and possibly going to

college. Parents adequately equate accreditation with the low academic performance that has been prevalent in the history of KCPS for decades. Ms. Riley stated, “I brought my child back to Banneker because of familiarity with the school and the school leaders. The maintaining of the accreditation was important. I’m looking at an 8<sup>th</sup> grader who will be going to high school next year; he doesn’t have time to go to schools that aren’t accredited.” In a similar study, Riley (2000) found that parents choose schools that they believe emphasize the kind of education and focus that they aspire to for their children.

According to the parents in this study, they chose Banneker for various reasons, i.e. the technology theme and positive relationships with the staff. However, many of the parents emphatically stated they wanted their child enrolled in any school other than KCPS. For example, Mr. Poole stated, “Just dealing with Kansas City public school district as long as we had. And dealing with the ups and downs and the ends and outs, we just wanted a fresh start. It was like at this point in time anything is better than what we are dealing with Kansas City District.” This was the consensus of the majority of the parents that were interviewed. They are just disgusted and fed up with all of the negative news about the educational, social, and political aspects of the traditional school system in Kansas City. Parents viewed charter schools as a place where their children have a better chance of academic success and are better prepared for high school and college. Reports show that mounting challenges in other public schools impact how parents perceive the ability of public schools to provide the quality of education they seek for their children (Bracey, 2007; Causey-Bush, 2005; Center for Education Reform, 2003; Conley, 2007).

These parents were thrilled to have school choice options because they wanted a “better” education for their child. A “better” education was defined by the parents in terms of the

curriculum, instruction, safety concerns, and their perceived positive relationships with staff members. Hassel's (1999) research found that parents believed that charter schools try to respond to family preferences and work to provide the services and the kind of education that parents demand (p.88). Parents were asked specifically, "Why did you choose not to send your child to the traditional neighborhood school that he/she would have been enrolled in?" The following responses were given:

- There are too many safety concerns.
- When I attended schools there the teachers just passed me along because I was quiet.
- The teachers didn't push me academically.
- I didn't feel like I was as prepared for college as I should have been.
- I went to school in the district, and I wanted better for my children.
- Those schools were just not an option.
- I walked into one school and a kid was in handcuffs; that turned me off.
- I didn't like the physical appearance of the building; it looked like a prison.
- There is just too much negativity reported in the news about the district.
- I just can't have my child going to a school that is not accredited.
- My oldest child went to school in the district and she was bullied a lot.
- Certain neighborhoods breed certain types of schools, and I didn't want my child surrounded by those negative influences.

It was these negative perceptions that led parents to choose an alternative school choice for their child. These perceptions are in line with previous and current research that the mounting

challenges facing TPS provide parents a reason to exercise their options and choose alternative school (Bracey, 2007; Causey-Bush, 2005; Center for Education Reform, 2003; Conley, 2007).

The parents had much more positive perceptions about Banneker. They felt like Banneker is a “better” school than the district school for many reasons. They feel good about their child being enrolled there. Also, many parents give their child autonomy to choose the school. When parents were asked, “Why do you maintain your enrollment at Banneker?” The following reasons were given:

- I like that they give tests frequently to know where the kids are academically.
- I feel like my child is being challenged academically.
- My child likes it here and wants to stay.
- I like that it is a year-round school.
- My child doesn’t have problems with bullying and the kids seem to get along here pretty good.
- I like that parents have to volunteer at least 10 hours per year; that keeps the parents involved.
- I believe my child has had some continual growth; socially and academically.
- The leadership has been the same for a long time and I have a good relationship with them.
- I’m familiar with the school, students, and staff so that makes me feel comfortable.
- The Superintendent is going to make sure the students have what they need.
- I believe the teachers really care about the kids. They aren’t here just to get a pay check.



Regardless of whether these parents can explain all of the educational lingo or assess whether the school is using the best curriculum or not, they are concerned about their child being in the best place for them. They are satisfied with the type of education their child is receiving at Banneker. These parents' positive perceptions are what they perceive to be qualities of a "good" school.

### **Academic Information – Where does it Fit in the Decision Making Process?**

Conclusively, parents chose Banneker because they believe that it is their best choice for their child's education at this time. They are convinced that at point Banneker is adequately preparing their child to go on to high school, and ultimately preparing them for college and/or a career. Based on the interview data, parents perceive that Banneker is the best school for their children based their child's academic progress. The majority of the parents that I interviewed were more interested in their child's individual academic progress, as marked by grades and district test than how well or poorly the school's test scores are. The parents believe that although the school's test scores are low the school is still benefiting their child by giving them a solid educational foundation. Many of the parents believe the school's test score data may not be an accurate representation of how well students are learning. Although parents do not believe the state test scores represent the overall success of the school's academic progress, many experts seem to believe that only academic test scores are important measures of school quality. Accordingly, the U.S. Department of Education (2007), suggest that the school's annual yearly progress (AYP), imply that students are succeeding in mastering the skills and collectively achieving prescribed expectations of the state. Previous and current researchers indicate that if a school is achieving perceived expectations its students are also gaining the skills and education prescribed by its mission which create positive parental perceptions about particular public schools (Hill et al., 1997; Teske et al., 2000).

Although experts base the school's academic success on state test scores, parents in this study do not. Many of the parents' perceptions are based on their child's grades, and how well the teacher feels they are doing in class on a daily, weekly, quarterly, and annual basis. Mrs. Barkley, states that she believes grades are a better reflection of student's ability. Ms. Nelson explained, "Grades are a constant and show me whether my kids are doing well or not. The state tests are a once per year thing. I think grades are much more accurate of assessing skill level. Ms. Trevor had this to say:

When I chose Banneker, I knew nothing about the school. I heard that the teachers were good and they challenged the kids. I did not have any information about the school's test scores. A lot of parents I talk to never talk about test scores.

I've discovered from parents in this study that their child's grades, district test data, pre/post tests, and teacher's comments are more important than the school's test scores. Generally, the parents' bottom line is the day-to-day achievement of their child in the classroom. Ms. Stanley stated, "The school's state test scores mean nothing to me overall. I want my kid to have a good education. I want a teacher that cares about my kids. It all centers on the teacher because if your child can have a positive relationship with your kid then they can learn from them. The teacher makes the difference in how well the students are doing".

Parents judge the school based on more than state test scores. Research shows that parents search for schools that have safe and secure learning environments; high test scores; caring and nurturing teachers; emphases on science, math, and technology; small class sizes; college-bound programs; and available interventions and support (Buchen, 2004; Coulso, 1999; Murphy et al., 2001; Sergiovanni, 2001; West & Hind, 2007). This study explores the parent's expectations of Banneker Charter School as an alternative public school of choice and how parents believe the institution will provide a successful future for their child. The parents at

Banneker may not seek out information on test scores while they are choosing a school; however, they receive test data information on yearly information. Parents at Banneker are generally satisfied with the school regardless of the state test score data because they base their decision on other variables. I've concluded based on parent and staff interviews that as long as students are improving academically and behaviorally based on grade and discipline reports, parents will remain satisfied with the school. Ms. Nelson is a parent that has five children enrolled at Banneker, and she has been a parent since her oldest son was 1<sup>st</sup> grade, he is now in high school. She had this to say:

I stayed here because I've seen my children progress. There were things that they could not do before and they've been able to do it the following year. That's an indication to me that they are learning, and that's what's most important to me. Many schools don't even allow students to enroll in their school if they did start there at a certain age. Banneker allows students to enroll from across the city from year-to-year. I believe that has a lot to do with the test scores not improving, but I choose to stay because my kids

**What Academic Data Really Matter to Parents?** Many experts believe that test score data is the most important measure of a quality school, but sometimes overlook the views of parents. Despite the rapid expansion of school choice, many doubt the ability of parents to make good choices. The Carnegie Foundation (1992) concluded that "many parents base their school choice decision on factors that have nothing to do with the quality of education", including the availability of daycare, convenience, social factors, and the range and quality of interscholastic sports (p.50). Research has shown that parents choose schools for academic reasons, but the question is which academic data.

When parents were interviewed initially, the majority of them stated that they did not seek out information about the school's state test scores while making their enrollment decisions. Many of the parents stated that the school's state test score data was not important to them. However, when parents were counseled individually, on test score data the information seemed to have a new meaning for them. When parents were interviewed the second time, and actually looked at the school's test data, their reactions contradicted what they said during the first interview. The parents' facial expressions were those of shock and disbelief. They made comments like, "Wow, I didn't know they were that low" or "I thought the scores were better than that". Many of them even stated that if they did not like the school so much they would place their child in a higher performing charter school. This was the prevailing thought for the majority of the parents. The parents are highly satisfied with their choice of Banneker, regardless of the state test data.

Conclusively, I've found out from these parents that state test scores did not matter to them in their decision making process for various reasons. Yes, they seemed surprised that Banneker was not ranked highly among other charter schools or the KCPS, but they all said that state test scores did not matter because they were satisfied with their school choice decision they've made. Based on their responses during the interviews, this group of parents enrolled their children in Banneker based on positive reports from other parents. Once their children were enrolled they became satisfied with their child's progress in school, and also the relationships that they developed with school staff. Parents don't want to know how other kids in the school are doing. They are only concerned about their child's progress. They tend to judge their child's progress on how well or poorly the teacher claims their child is doing, along with grades, class

test, and homework. All of these factors impact the parents' perceptions about how good the school is and is deemed more important than the school's test data.

### **Implications for Policy and Practice**

My research suggests several implications for policy and practice for Benjamin Banneker Charter Academy of Technology, a public charter school in Kansas City. Knowing the characteristics that parents seek from their school of choice is essential for the very existence of this charter school. It is imperative that school leaders reflect and strengthen five key characteristics and other variables found in this study and make them as an ongoing key focus for their future: (a) a safe and secure learning environment for all children; (b) a small school and small class sizes; (c) focus on science, technology, engineering, and math (STEM); (d) improvement on state tests scores. In the end, if the school develops and maintains these five key characteristics, it can essentially strengthen the support and interest of other parents who choose this school for their children. The school leaders, along with the other stakeholders can emphasize these characteristics as they work to develop a new strategic plan to address school improvement methods.

Studies indicate that some low-income and minority parents may lack information as they choose between school options (Carver & Salganik, 1991; Payne, 1993). The parents at Banneker may not seek out information on test scores while they are choosing a school; however, they receive test data information on an annual basis in a group setting. Parents are presented with state test data in orientation meetings where there are several items on the agenda to be discussed. I've concluded several reasons the parents may not receive the data or fully understand what is being presented to them. First of all, these meetings usually have low attendance. Secondly, the parents may not be present to receive the information, parents may not

fully understand what the scores mean. Lastly, parents do not associate the overall test data with their child's individual achievement, therefore they dismiss the information. This suggests that more detailed information about the school's test scores is made available to parents. Parents should be made aware of exactly what each level of achievement means for the school and implications of the scores on the school's accreditation. The school's Administrative team should commit to individual counseling of parents as an essential component to the overall improvement of the school's student achievement goals.

Sharing the school's test data and the child's individual test data with parents could have a positive impact on student achievement. I would also recommend that parents are counseled on a one-to-one basis when presented with their child's state test data. Each teacher should be responsible for going over that student's test scores with the parent. Explaining exactly what achievement their child performed on in each subject and correlating that information with classroom performance and district assessment data. Having individualized parent conferences to discuss district and state test data could be beneficial to the school's overall achievement data. Conferencing with parents about all test data, and specifically state test data would give the school an opportunity to engage the parents in academic discussions. Engaging parents in discussions about state test data could possibly encourage parents to be more involved in their children's education. Parents may be encouraged to read more and do homework with their child at night, as well as consistently work with the teacher to track the child's progress. According to a report from the Southwest Educational Development Laboratory, When schools, families, and community groups work together to support learning, children tend to do better in school, stay in school longer, and like school more (2002). Because the goal is to increase individual student achievement, then parents are instrumental in that process. The research has shown that

programs and interventions that engage families in supporting their children's learning at home are linked to higher student achievement (Henderson & Mapp, 2002).

Many of the parents cited poor academic achievement and accreditation as reasons for not sending their child to KCPS. Eventually, these same parents could potentially stop choosing Banneker for those same reasons. Unlike KCPS, a charter school in Kansas City would not be provisionally accredited or even lose its accreditation based on low performance. Charter schools are either accredited or they do not exist. Charter schools can be closed by the state department of education when the academic performance of the students does not improve. In the state of Missouri, charter schools have been closed for a number of reasons. Reasons such as, low performance, low enrollment, poor fiscal management, and failure to comply with charter school law have been the primary reasons charter schools were closed in Kansas City.

If Banneker is going to compete with schools across the city and continue to remain open, then the overall academic performance of the students must improve immediately. I would recommend the school Administrators and School Board work to devise a strategic plan to address the continued lack of academic progress that focuses on increasing parental involvement and educating parents on performance indicators. Although parents do not use state test data to make school choice decisions, the importance of academic growth for all students should remain as a top priority for every school. Accordingly, the U.S. Department of Education (2007), suggest that the school's annual yearly progress (AYP), imply that students are succeeding in mastering the skills and collectively achieving prescribed expectations of the state. Previous and current researchers indicate that if a school is achieving perceived expectations its students are also gaining the skills and education prescribed by its mission which create positive parental perceptions about particular public schools (Hill et al., 1997; Teske et al., 2000).

### **Is There a Dilemma for the Parents of Kansas City?**

The dilemma of finding the right school for their children remains a challenging task for many parents, especially those who do not have the financial resources to overcome the obstacles of sending their children to privately funded schools or moving closer to high-performing public schools (Chubb & Moe, 1990; Lankford & Wyckoff, 1992). Many of the findings on parental choice of schools has been linked to the school's overall academic achievement (Hoxby, 2001; Fiske and Ladd, 2000; Solomon, 2003). There have also been other reasons that promoted preference of charter schools, such as facilities, location, and extracurricular activities (Schneider & Buckley, 2002; Schneider, et al., 2000). In areas with few good school options for students, there are limits to parents' ability to find a school that represents a substantial improvement over the school their child already attends. This may be one reason that parents in this study weigh their perception of how safe the school is and other issues over academic achievement data produced by state test scores.

KCPS has been plagued for years with similar issues of other large urban school districts across the country. One of the major issues of KCPS has been a revolving door of Superintendents, low academic performance, alarming high school drop-out rate, and drastically decreasing student enrollment. The district was provisionally accredited in 2002 due to low academic performance, after losing its accreditation in 2000. Provisional accreditation means that the school district is still accredited with consequences defined by state law. An unaccredited status requires that the unaccredited school district must pay tuition for students transferring to an accredited school district, and that receiving district must accept those students (Retrieved from [www.dese.mo.gov](http://www.dese.mo.gov)). After losing its accreditation in 2012, the school district was given two years to regain provisional accreditation. More recently in 2013 the state



department of elementary and secondary education threatened to take over the district due to continued poor academic performance. As a result of rising state assessment scores during the spring of 2014, KCPS is once again provisionally accredited.

Despite the rapid expansion of school choice, many doubt the ability of parents to make good choices. The Carnegie Foundation (1992) concluded that “many parents base their school choice decision on factors that have nothing to do with the quality of education”, including the availability of daycare, convenience, social factors, and the range and quality of interscholastic sports (p.50). There is much concern about how parents make decisions concerning school choice. If parents, specifically low-income parents, consistently choose schools based on non-academic factors, then school choice could become disastrous. It could lead schools to concentrate more on social factors to attract parents, rather than academic factors.

Arguments in favor of greater school choice rests on two propositions: (a) that competition among schools for students will help reduce inefficiencies in the delivery of education, and, in doing so, improve educational outcomes, and (b) that choice would serve to give more control over educational decisions to parents who in turn would choose good schools for their children (Goldhaber, 1999). Supporters of school choice believe that because tax dollars follow students schools have to attract students in order to survive. In theory, parents will vote with their feet for good schools and bad schools would be forced to either improve or go out of business (Goldhaber, 1999). The foundational argument of school choice rests upon the notion that when parents choose their child’s school, consumer satisfaction is expected to increase. Existing research, without exception, has found that parents are more satisfied with schools they have chosen (Buckley & Schneider, 2003). It has also found that levels of parental satisfaction appear to be uniformly high in charter schools (Schneider, et al., 2000). Perhaps, one

explanation of this is that education is a complex, multifaceted “good”, and choice allows parents to select schools that emphasize the kind of education they want for their children (Schneider, et al., 2000).

The opportunity to choose a charter school over a traditional public school places parents in the position of an educational consumer. Based on market ideas charter schools must respond to the needs and expectations of their consumers in order for them to survive (Chubb & Moe, 1990). If parents, as educational consumers, promote competition between schools then ultimately this should force schools to improve academically and socially. Martinez et al., (1995) explain that the central focus behind the concept of school choice is that parents are not only demanding a higher quality education for their children, but they are motivated to go out and find it. Therefore, leaders in all educational settings for school-age children must understand why parents select specific educational options for their children. Examining parents’ experiences as they actually engage in choosing schools can help us better understand parental decision making in choosing charter schools.

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## **Appendix A**

### **Charter School Law in Missouri**

#### **Senate Bill 781**

**CHARTER SCHOOLS** - Charter schools may be established in St. Louis City and Kansas City School Districts by the school board or a four-year public college or university or a public community college in the same or an adjoining county. Applications denied by the local board may be appealed to the State Board.

The act specifies requirements for the proposed charter to be submitted to the sponsor by the entity seeking to establish a charter school. Applications to sponsors other than school boards shall also be submitted to the school board of the district where the school is to be located, and the school board may file objections with the proposed sponsor. Applications which are denied may be appealed to the State Board of Education. No more than five percent of the buildings currently in use in a district for instructional purposes may be converted to charter schools.

Charter schools may not limit admission based upon race or ability. A charter school shall be a nonprofit corporation established under Chapter 355, RSMo. Meetings of the charter school's board of directors shall be open meetings under Chapter 610, RSMo. Charter schools may affiliate with a four-year college or university or a community college for certain, specified purposes. An employee of a college sponsoring a charter school may not serve on the charter school's board of directors.

Geographical regions of charter schools shall not create racially or socio-economically isolated schools. One third of a sponsor's charters shall give priority to dropouts or at-risk students. Charter schools shall be nonsectarian, financially accountable, offer a comprehensive program of instruction for one or more grade levels, have methods to measure pupil progress towards state academic standards and comply with laws pertaining to health, safety and minimum educational standards. Charter schools shall be exempt from all other laws and rules pertaining to schools, except as provided in this act. Charter schools shall use accounting procedures consistent with the Missouri financial accounting manual.

Charter schools shall serve one or more grades from K-12 and may also provide Early Childhood education, if funding for that program is established by the state.

Pupils residing in the district or eligible to attend under the voluntary transfer program may be enrolled at a charter school.

Charter schools shall provide data for a comparable group study, and the Department shall commission a study, every two years, of the performance of charter schools and the impact of charter schools on school districts. Charter schools shall not be included in Missouri School Improvement Program (MSIP) reviews.

A charter school shall provide for special education needs of its students and the charter school may contract with a school district or other entity to provide special education services. A charter school and school district may agree for the charter school to contract with the school district for special education services, and, in such cases, the proportionate share of state and federal funds for disabled students shall go to charter schools educating such students.

The school district where the pupil resides shall pay the state and local share of per pupil operating revenues, plus any other federal or state aid received on behalf of such child, to the charter school. Each charter school shall report the names, address and eligibility for state categorical aid for each pupil to the school district of residence and to the Department, and each charter school shall promptly report to the district and the Department when a student discontinues enrollment. A charter school is eligible to receive transportation funding, which the charter school shall then use to either provide or contract for those services. Debt incurred by a charter school shall not be a debt of the school district. A charter school which incurs debt shall include a repayment plan in its financial plan. Upon dissolution, debts of the charter school shall be resolved under Chapter 355, RSMo.

Personnel at a charter school shall participate in the applicable school retirement system of the district in which the school is located. A teacher retains seniority rights and permanent teacher status if the teacher elects to teach at a charter school and remain an employee of the district.

A charter school may employ non-certificated teachers to comprise up to 20% of the instructional staff, but such teachers shall not be members of PSRS. Non-certificated instructional personnel must be supervised by certificated instructional personnel. All instructional staff shall have education, experience and skills appropriate to their instructional duties. School district employees may be employed by the district and the charter school contract may provide for employees to choose to remain employed by the district. A criminal and child abuse background check shall be conducted before hiring any employee of the charter school.

## **Appendix B**

### **Informed Consent Letter for Staff**

Dear Staff Member ,

As a doctoral student at the University of Kansas, I am completing some research on parental choice of Benjamin Banneker Charter School in Kansas City, Missouri. I am asking for your participation in an interview regarding my research into understanding why parents have chosen Benjamin Banneker as their school of choice. Given the availability of parents and the size of the parent group, your participation is critical to the success of this research. Although there are questions about your perceptions pertaining to school choice, this information will not be shared with anyone. The information obtained through these interviews will be kept strictly confidential and will be only used for the research purposes stated above.

The Department of Educational Leadership Policy Studies at the University of Kansas supports the practice of protection for human subjects participating in research. The following information is provided for you to decide whether you wish to participate in the present study. You may refuse to sign this form and not participate in this study. You should be aware that even if you agree to participate, you are free to withdraw at any time. If you do withdraw from this study, it will not affect your relationship with this school, the services it may provide to you, or the University of Kansas.

Your willingness to participate in an interview lasting approximately thirty minutes to one hour is critical for this research. There is absolutely no right or wrong answers to the questions, and your insight would be greatly appreciated. Your involvement is strictly voluntary, and whether you choose to participate or not will in no way affect your relationship with Benjamin Banneker Charter Academy. You are also free to withdraw at any time without penalty. You will receive \$10 cash payment for your time and consideration to this research project. Investigators may ask for your social security number in order to comply with federal and state tax and accounting regulations.

We do not anticipate any risks associated with your participation in this study. The information you share will be treated confidentially, and every effort will be made to protect your individual identity. Your identifiable information will not be shared unless (a) it is required by law or university policy, or (b) you give written permission. Your name will not be associated with any research reports or publications unless you give prior approval.

Your participation in this research study does require audio recording of the interview. With your permission, we would like to audio record the interview so it can be transcribed & analyzed by me at a later date. If at any time you wish the recorder to be turned off, we will do so. None one else will have access to the recorded interviews. All data collected during this study will be kept in my secure, password protected computer. The recorded will be destroyed within 30 days after the completion of the research study.

Thank you in advance for your consideration. We believe this research will benefit our school greatly and plan to share findings with individuals at Benjamin Banneker Charter Academy. We believe this study will also be of interest to other charter schools and charter school sponsoring agencies.

If you have questions or concerns, please feel free to contact me at w512b999@ku.edu or call me at 816-920-3803. You may also contact my dissertation chair at the University of Kansas, Dr. Jennifer Ng at JNg@ku.edu. You may also contact the Human Subjects Committee Lawrence Campus (HSCL) University of Kansas, 2385 Irving Hill Road, Lawrence, Kansas 66045-7568, email irb@ku.edu, or call (785) 864-7429 or (785) 864-7385.

Sincerely,

Wendy Barnes, MA, M.Ed.  
Ed.D Candidate, Educational Leadership & Policy Studies  
University of Kansas

I agree to take part in this study as a research participant. By my signature I affirm that I am at least 18 years old and that I have received a copy of this Consent and Authorization form.

---

Print Participant's Name

---

Participant's Signature

---

Date

## **Appendix C**

### **Informed Consent Letter for Parents**

Dear Parent,

As a doctoral student at the University of Kansas, I am completing some research on parental choice of Benjamin Banneker Charter School in Kansas City, Missouri. I am asking for your participation in an interview regarding my research into understanding why parents have chosen Benjamin Banneker as their school of choice. Given the availability of parents and the size of the parent group, your participation is critical to the success of this research. Although there are questions about your perceptions pertaining to school choice, this information will not be shared with anyone. The information obtained through these interviews will be kept strictly confidential and will be only used for the research purposes stated above.

The Department of Educational Leadership Policy Studies at the University of Kansas supports the practice of protection for human subjects participating in research. The following information is provided for you to decide whether you wish to participate in the present study. You may refuse to sign this form and not participate in this study. You should be aware that even if you agree to participate, you are free to withdraw at any time. If you do withdraw from this study, it will not affect your relationship with this school, the services it may provide to you, or the University of Kansas.

Your willingness to participate in an interview lasting approximately thirty minutes to one hour is critical for this research. There is absolutely no right or wrong answers to the questions, and your insight would be greatly appreciated. Your involvement is strictly voluntary, and whether you choose to participate or not will in no way affect your relationship with Benjamin Banneker Charter Academy. You are also free to withdraw at any time without penalty. You will receive \$10 cash payment for your time and consideration to this research project. Investigators may ask for your social security number in order to comply with federal and state tax and accounting regulations.

We do not anticipate any risks associated with your participation in this study. The information you share will be treated confidentially, and every effort will be made to protect your individual identity. Your identifiable information will not be shared unless (a) it is required by law or university policy, or (b) you give written permission. Your name will not be associated with any research reports or publications unless you give prior approval.

Your participation in this research study does require audio recording of the interview. With your permission, we would like to audio record the interview so it can be transcribed & analyzed by me at a later date. If at any time you wish the recorder to be turned off, we will do so. None one else will have access to the recorded interviews. All data collected during this study will be kept in my secure, password protected computer. The recorded will be destroyed within 30 days after the completion of the research study.

Thank you in advance for your consideration. We believe this research will benefit our school greatly and plan to share findings with individuals at Benjamin Banneker Charter Academy. We believe this study will also be of interest to other charter schools and charter school sponsoring agencies.

If you have questions or concerns, please feel free to contact me at w512b999@ku.edu or call me at 816-920-3803. You may also contact my dissertation chair at the University of Kansas, Dr. Jennifer Ng at JNg@ku.edu. You may also contact the Human Subjects Committee Lawrence Campus (HSCL) University of Kansas, 2385 Irving Hill Road, Lawrence, Kansas 66045-7568, email irb@ku.edu, or call (785) 864-7429 or (785) 864-7385.

Sincerely,

Wendy Barnes, MA, M.Ed.  
Ed.D Candidate, Educational Leadership & Policy Studies  
University of Kansas

I agree to take part in this study as a research participant. By my signature I affirm that I am at least 18 years old and that I have received a copy of this Consent and Authorization form.

---

Print Participant's Name

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Participant's Signature

---

Date



## Appendix D

### Percentage of Students scoring Proficient/Advanced on MAP 2016 for Charter Schools

#### English Language Arts 2016

<b>District Name</b>	<b>Percent Proficient/ Advanced</b>
1. Academie Lafayette	79.2%
2. University Academy	66.8%
3. Kauffman	65.7%
4. Crossroads Academy Kansas City	64.2%
5. Allen Village	55.2%
6. Scuola Vita Nuova	51.2%
7. Frontier School of Innovation	48.4%
8. Gordon Poole ( <i>only 3<sup>rd</sup> grade tested</i> )	47.1%
9. KIPP	41.9%
10. Lee. A. Tolbert	41.3%
11. Alta Vista	41.1%
12. DelaSalle Charter School	39.1%
13. Kansas City School District	32.4%
14. Hope Leadership Academy	32.1%
15. Pathway Academy	31.0%
16. Brookside Charter	29.0%
17. Hogan Preparatory Academy	28.2%
<b>18. Benjamin Banneker</b>	<b>27.4%</b>
19. Della Lamb Elementary	18.3%
20. Genesis School Inc.	16.5%

#### Mathematics 2016

<b>District Name</b>	<b>Percent Proficient or Advanced</b>
1. Academie Lafayette	67.1%
2. Crossroads Academy Kansas City	59.7%
3. Gordon Poole ( <i>only 3<sup>rd</sup> grade tested</i> )	47.1%
4. Kauffman	46.9%
5. Scuola Vita Nuova	46.1%
6. University Academy	44.3%
7. Alta Vista Charter School	41.7%
8. Frontier School of Innovation	36.1%
9. KIPP	32.4%
10. Allen Village	28.6%
11. Kansas City School District	22.0%
12. Pathway Academy	18.2%
13. Lee A. Tolbert	16.0%
14. Hogan Preparatory Academy	15.3%
15. Hope Leadership Academy	14.3%

16. Brookside Charter	13.9%
17. DelaSalle Charter School	12.5%
<b>18. Benjamin Banneker</b>	<b>12.2%</b>
19. Genesis	10.5%
20. Della Lamb Elementary	3.0%

**Science 2016**

<b>District Name</b>	<b>Percent Proficient or Advanced</b>
1. Academie Lafayette	70.4%
2. University Academy	60.4%
3. Crossroads Academy Kansas City	55.0%
4. Kauffman	54.5%
5. Alta Vista	42.2%
6. Frontier School of Innovation	39.8%
7. Allen Village	36.9%
8. Scuola Vita Nuova	34.1%
9. DelaSalle Charter School	30.8%
10. KIPP	24.5%
11. Brookside Charter	23.4%
12. Kansas City School District	23.0%
13. Hogan Preparatory Academy	20.4%
<b>14. B. Banneker</b>	<b>17.3%</b>
15. Lee A. Tolbert	16.4%
16. Pathway Academy	16.2%
17. Della Lamb Elementary	13.6%
18. Genesis School Inc.	10.5%
19. Hope Leadership Academy	0.0%

## Appendix E

### Kansas City Charter and Public Schools - 2016 APR Data

15 APR Score	LEA Name	Grade Span	Population	Region	Sponsor
98.6%	Crossroads Academy	K-7	280	KC	UCM
96.1%	University Academy	K-12	1,001	KC	UMKC
95.6%	Academie Lafayette	K-8	871	KC	UCM
93.9%	Frontier School of Innovation	K-12	1,268	KC	UMKC
92.9%	Ewing Marion Kauffman	5-8	532	KC	MU
92.5%	Kipp: Endeavor Academy	5-8	275	KC	MU
88.8%	Scuola Vita Nuova	K-8	200	KC	UCM
87.1%	Allen Village	K-12	639	KC	UMKC
85%	Alta Vista Charter School	K-2, 6-12	735	KC	UCM
75.0%	Hope Leadership Academy	K-5	138	KC	UCM
75.0%	Academy Integrated Arts (attend only)	K-3	88	KC	UMKC
71.3%	Brookside Charter School	K-8	543	KC	UMKC
68.9%	Hogan Preparatory Academy	K-12	1,032	KC	UCM
68.8 %	Genesis School Inc. (building)	K-8	269	KC	UMKC
64.3%	Pathway Academy	K-6		KC	UMKC
63.9%	Kansas City Schools	K-8	436	KC	
60.0%	Benjamin Banneker Academy	K-8	334	KC	UCM
58.8%	Lee A. Tolbert Comm.Academy	K-8	514	KC	UMKC
53.9%	DeLaSalle Charter School	9-12	299	KC	UMKC
46.3%	Della Lamb Elementary	K-8	602	KC	UCM

## Appendix F

Dear Parent(s)/Guardian(s):

The Missouri Assessment Program (MAP) Grade-Level Assessments evaluate students' progress toward the Missouri Learning Standards. Grade-Level Assessments provide important information that contributes to decisions concerning individual students, groups of students, and educational programs. Assessments are given in the subject areas of Communication Arts (grades 3-8), Mathematics (grades 3-8) and Science (grades 5 and 8).

A policy statement, adopted by the Missouri State Board of Education, designated the purposes of the Missouri Assessment Program as: ☐ Improving students' acquisition of important knowledge, skills and competencies; ☐ Monitoring the performance of Missouri's education system; ☐ Empowering students and their families to improve their educational prospects; and ☐ Supporting the teaching and learning process.

The effectiveness of an assessment program depends on the wise choice of assessment methods, appropriate administration procedures and accurate interpretation of results.

The Grade-Level Assessments include multiple types of questions or items: ☐ Selected Response (also known as multiple choice) items are composed of a question followed by a series of possible responses. Students must select the correct response or responses. ☐ Constructed Response or Short Text items require students to supply an appropriate response rather than making a selection from a list of choices. ☐ Performance Tasks/Events allow students to work through more complicated items using real-world scenarios. ☐ Technology Enhanced items make use of technology in the presentation of the item, the ways in which students respond, or both. For example, students might listen to a story and then drag and drop labels into a diagram, or click on specific parts of a text to provide a response.

Your child's Individual Student Report (ISR), includes an Achievement Level, which will describe his or her performance as Below Basic, Basic, Proficient, or Advanced. The report will also include a short description of the knowledge and skills that are typically demonstrated by students in each Achievement Level. The Missouri Department of Elementary and Secondary Education (DESE) publishes a Guide to Interpreting Results (GIR) that provides additional details about the content of the Individual Student Reports. The GIR is available on the DESE website at: <http://dese.mo.gov/college-careerreadiness/assessment/grade-level>.

## **Appendix G**

### **Interview Questions for Individual Parents**

1. What did you know about charter schools in general before enrolling your child/children? What were your thoughts about the type of education your child would receive in a charter school before enrolling your child?
2. What did you know or hear about this school before you enrolled your child here?
3. Please explain why you chose this school. What factors affect your decision to maintain enrollment in this school? How do you make that decision from year to year?
4. What characteristics about this school are you most satisfied with? What characteristics of this school are you most dissatisfied with? What changes would you like to see occur? What avenues do you take to express your concerns about the school?
5. Give reasons why you chose not to send your child to a school in KCMSD where he/she would have ordinarily been assigned? Give reasons for
6. What characteristics did you consider important for schools that you prefer for your child to attend? What was most important to you in your decision making when you were looking for a school? What information was most important for you to know about the school?
7. When you were trying to decide on a school, did you seek out information about the school? Who did you ask? How did you gather information about the school?

## **Appendix H**

### **Interview Questions for School Staff**

1. Why did parents choose this charter school as an alternative to traditional public school?  
Please explain which programs, whether curricular or extracurricular are do parents state as most important characteristics that attracted them to this school?
2. What makes this school more unique than the TPS in the community?
3. How do you believe the parents view the teachers and leadership of this school?
4. What information is most important to parental decision making of charter schools in Kansas City?
5. How do parents obtain information about schools in order to make a decision pertaining to school choice?
6. What do parents value most in schools?
7. What is the greatest barrier of parental decision making in Kansas City?